

# The Quest of the Chief Good



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# *The Quest of the Chief Good:*

EXPOSITORY LECTURES

ON

THE BOOK ECCLESIASTES,

WITH

A NEW TRANSLATION,

BY

SAMUEL COX.

*A Commentary for Laymen.*

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TO

Mary Ellen Sach,

THE BEST FRIEND

HE HAS YET FOUND OR HOPES TO FIND,

THIS VOLUME

IS

AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED


BY

THE AUTHOR.



## P R E F A C E.

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 HERE is now no dearth of Commentaries adapted to the use of Scholars. But all men are not scholars, nor even all who love and study the Bible. Among these there are many who have little Greek, less Hebrew; and many more who are acquainted with no language but their own. For such students of the Bible comparatively little has been done. They have no Translation on the accuracy of which they can rely, nor do those whose learning and godliness give them authority seem at all disposed to furnish them with one. The best Commentaries of the day are not written for them, nor popularized for their use. And meantime,

with no parade  
Of Hebrew or Greek  
To make them afraid,

many of the most subtle and daring assaults on the Sacred Documents are conveyed to them in their own tongue.

The surest defence against such assaults lies, I think, not in formal refutations of them, but in a more profound and accurate acquaintance with the history, contents, and aim of the several Books of Scripture. It has long therefore been a ruling endeavour with me to acquaint myself and those whom I am called to teach with the mind of God as revealed by the holy men who were inspired by the Holy Ghost. One result of that endeavour is the following Commentary. Its contents were delivered to my Congregation in a series of Expository Lectures. As my Congregation is not composed of scholars, I was compelled to omit all discussion of various readings and disputed renderings, grammatical problems and niceties of criticism—a happy necessity for me, since I am not competent to deal with such questions. My aim was

simply to bring out the leading thoughts of "the Preacher" as concisely and clearly as I could, and to clothe them in words familiar to those who, though of fair general culture, had no knowledge of Hebrew and no love for theological or scholastic technicalities: in short, to give the results of the best modern criticism without obtruding the critical process by which they had been reached.

I now offer these Lectures to a larger circle; but, though I have in part re-written them, I have retained their original form, lest, in recasting them, I should fall into a more bookish style, a style less simple and direct. In the absence of better help, I hope there are some who will find even this brief imperfect Commentary helpful to them. If any of my readers have been wont to think of Ecclesiastes as a series of detached gnomes or maxims, not always very wise, and sometimes distinctly immoral; they will find, I trust, that it is rather a Drama which sets forth truths of the profoundest and most



practical importance, truths as vital and momentous to us as to the antique Hebrew world, in long lines of connected thought, each mounting to its appropriate climax, and all pressing on to a lofty and most impressive close. If they discover, with some natural regret, that not a few familiar passages must be read in a new sense, they will also discover, I hope, that the new sense of these passages is at least as instructive as the old, and that the whole Book gains in coherence, in clearness, in power.

They may rely—and here I am simply anticipating a question sure to be asked—on the superior accuracy of the “New Translation;” for it is based on that of Mr. Ginsburg, perhaps the highest living authority on all that pertains to the Book Ecclesiastes. In common with all students of this Book, I am profoundly indebted to him. He has given seven years of learned leisure to this Scripture; and in his “Critical Commentary” he has gathered together most of the exegetical helps the Student

requires. Of these I have tried to avail myself in order to ascertain the true text, and the true meaning of the text, adding what I could on the historical relations, dramatic force, and moral significance of this inspired Poem. For the Scholar his Commentary is indispensable, and, so far as my reading goes, unrivalled; but for the general reader its very perfection becomes “an effect defective,” since to him its constant citations of the Hebrew text, coupled with frequent references to cognate forms in Syriac and Arabic, present insuperable difficulties. Had his translation been as idiomatic as it appears to me accurate, I should not have been at the pains to make one for myself: and even as it is, my main task in translating has been to give his renderings in more simple nervous English, preserving so far as I could—and that is less possible in this than in almost any other Book in the Canon—the familiar beauties of the Authorized Version. In dividing the Book into Sections I have also fol-

lowed his lead, following it all the more gladly because in the main his divisions tally with Ewald's: but should other divisions be preferred, the chief connections of thought between chapter and chapter, verse and verse, would not thereby be broken.

My debts to other writers I have acknowledged as I have contracted them, with one exception. I chanced to be reading Epictetus at the time I wrote these Lectures; and was not a little grateful to him for constantly leading me to a point of view from which the "words of the Preacher" grew more clear and forcible. Those who happen to be familiar with the "Dissertationes" and "Enchiridion" of that most Christian of the Classical Writers will readily understand how closely akin his tone of thought is to that of Coheleth.

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## INTRODUCTION.



## INTRODUCTION.

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### § 1. *On the Authorship, Design, and Contents of the Book.*

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THE Bible is a book, but it is also many books in one.\* It is one book, for it contains a progressive revelation of a single coherent scheme of truth, of the thoughts of a great and unique Mind. Nevertheless, this one book is composed of many books, each of which has its own author, its distinct purpose, its special form, and lends its peculiar note to the complex harmony of Scripture. This noble company of holy authors were moved by one and the self-same Spirit to write what, and as, they did; and it was by His wise careful providence that their writings were preserved and added to the Canon. There is not a single book in the Book, therefore, which will not repay our profoundest study by disclosing some aspect of the Divine

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\* *Bible*, the Book, is from *Biblia*, the books. Thus, by the happy solecism of this singularized plural, the multiform unity of Holy Writ is indicated by the very name we give to the Sacred Volume. Jerome calls it "the Holy Library;" and an eminent Oriental scholar, speaking of an experience which many of us have shared, says, "I gave up 'a book,' and found 'a literature.'"

Will which we need to know. Only as we study each of the separate books of which it is composed can we apprehend the Revelation which runs through them all.

This, indeed, seems to be the special work appointed to us in the present age, viz., the study and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Our fathers might give themselves to Dogmatic Theology, to the construction of systems of Christian Doctrine based on Scripture texts. We cannot. For as yet we have no stable basis, or no recognized and unassailable basis, on which to rear them. Recent discoveries in the sciences of Language and History have taught us a little to distrust the text of Scripture which our fathers received without a doubt, and the interpretations of it with which they were content. Our Authorized Version, although so admirable as a composition, is not equally admirable as a translation, but is often inaccurate and misleading. We cannot quote from it without running some risk of being told that the Hebrew or the Greek tells a very different tale. Passages which we have been accustomed to cite in proof of the resurrection from the dead, for instance, or the everlasting punishment of the wicked, or as descriptive of the glory of the Messiah, prove to have held no such meaning in the minds of those who penned them. Whole books which we thought to have been written at one age and by one man turn out to have been written by another man in another age. So that, happily for us, we are driven from

the study of Theology to the study of the Bible ; and, instead of constructing dogmas and creeds, we must examine and interpret Scriptures : it becomes our duty to lay the foundations on which our children, if they are so minded, may rear the lofty and far-shining structures of Systematic Theology.

This necessity, this duty, is surely a very welcome one, for what can be more wholesome, what more grateful to us, than to have our minds brought into contact with the very mind of God as revealed through holy men of old ? than to learn how they—men of like passions with us, yet under the inspiration of the Almighty—regarded the complex mysterious facts of that life which we now live in the flesh, and which is as strange and perplexing to us as it was to them ? Yet this most wholesome task has been too much neglected. For ever boasting that the Bible, the whole Bible, and the Bible only, is our religion ; how much of this “ religion ” do we know ? How many of us could give an orderly and accurate account of any one of its books, of its author, date, history, form, sequence of thought ; of the conditions of the race or generation to which it was addressed ; of the errors it rebukes, and of the views of truth and duty which it enforces ? To tell the plain truth, we are dreadfully and shamefully ignorant of the Bible in which we make our boast ; and it is high time we left off boasting about it and set ourselves to study what it really is, high time



that we replaced our customary examination of detached verses with a careful investigation of the history and scope of its separate books.

Now if we care to give ourselves to this task, where shall we begin? As we glance along the Biblical "Library," in which there are so many volumes of which we know very little, and would like to know more,—which shall we take down? Let us take one of which we know least, and must know least, so long as we know it only in the Authorized Version, to wit, "Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher." It has many claims on our preference besides our ignorance of it. I will mention only two of these claims, and will only mention them. The first is, that, unlike most of the Hebrew Scriptures but in common with the Book of Job, it is Oriental, or even human, in its tone rather than Jewish. It gives no prominence to the Law of Moses, or to the theology and ritual built up on that Law, but appeals to the general instincts and needs of the common heart of man. It is hardly going too far to say that, except for the use it makes of the name and fame of Solomon—and even these are common to all Eastern Literature—it might have been written by a Gentile for Gentile readers. Its second claim is, that it discusses those dark problems of Providence which have always tasked thoughtful men of every race, which still task and perplex the thoughts of men; and discusses them in a dramatic form which lends the discussion an additional and peculiar interest. If the choice

need any further vindication, I can only hope that the Book itself will supply it as we grow more familiar with the Preacher's words.

Here, then, we have the book *Ecclesiastes* detached from the other Scriptures, a volume complete in itself, in order that we may thoughtfully and reverently examine it. Among the very earliest questions we have to ask about it are these: Who wrote it? When was it written? To whom was it addressed? What are its main design and scope? All these questions you probably suppose to admit of an easy and distinct reply. Were they asked of you, you would answer, "Solomon wrote this book: of course, therefore, it was written in his lifetime, and addressed to the race, to that generation of the race, over which he ruled: and his design in writing it was to record his own experience of life for their instruction." Now if any proof were needed of the profound ignorance of the Bible which afflicts even intelligent Christian men, it might be found in the fact that no one of these answers is true or anywhere near the truth. The Book *Ecclesiastes* was not written by Solomon, nor for centuries after his death. It was addressed to a generation of feeble and oppressed captives who had been carried out of Judea, and not to the free prosperous nation which rose to its highest pitch in the reign of the Wise King. It is a dramatic representation of what some Jewish Rabbi supposed King Solomon's

experience to have been; and its design was to comfort those who were groaning under the heaviest wrongs of Time with the hope of Immortality.

To scholars deeply versed in the niceties of Oriental languages, the most convincing proof of the comparatively modern date and authorship of this Book is to be found in its words, and idioms, and style. The base forms of Hebrew and the large intermixture of foreign terms, phrases, and turns of speech which characterize it,—these with the absence of the nobler rhythmic forms native to the purer Hebrew poetry are to them a conclusive demonstration that it was written during the Rabbinical period,—at a time long subsequent to that Augustan age in which Solomon lived and wrote. The Critics and Commentators whose names stand highest tell us that it would be just as easy for them to believe that Hooker wrote Blair's Sermons, or that Shakespeare wrote the plays of Sheridan Knowles, or that Lord Bacon wrote Tupper's Proverbial Philosophy—and improbability itself can hardly be stretched beyond that point—as to believe that King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. And, of course, on such questions as these we can only defer to the verdict of men who have made them the study of their lives.\*

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\* Rosenmüller, Ewald, Knobel, De Wette, Ginsburg, Davidson, and many other competent judges are agreed on this point; and even those who in part differ from them, differ only in assigning the book to a date still further removed from the time of Solomon.

But with all our deference for learning, we have so often seen the conclusions of the ripest scholars reversed by their successors, and we all know "questions of words" to be capable of so many opposing interpretations, that probably we should still hold our judgment in suspense were there no arguments against the common conceptions of Ecclesiastes "such as plain men use" and can understand. There are many such arguments, however; arguments, as it seems to me, of a most conclusive force.

As, for instance, this :—The whole social state described in this Book is utterly unlike what we know to have been the condition of the Hebrews during the reign of Solomon, but exactly accords with the condition of the captive Israelites who, at the disruption of the Hebrew monarchies, were carried away into Babylonia. Under Solomon the Hebrew State was at its best and loftiest. His throne was surrounded by statesmen of a tried sagacity: his judges were incorrupt. Commerce grew and prospered till gold became as common as silver had been, and silver as common as brass. Literature flourished and produced its most perfect fruits. And the people, though heavily taxed during the later years of his reign, enjoyed a security, a freedom, an abundance unknown whether to their fathers or to their children. "Judah and Israel," writes the Sacred Historian,\* painting a graphic picture with a few

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\* 1 Kings iv. 20, 25.

rapid touches, "were many in number as the sands by the sea, eating, and drinking, and making merry. . . . And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his figtree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon." But as we read this Book we gather from it the picture of a social state in which kings were childish, and princes addicted to revelry and drunkenness;\* great fools were lifted to high places and rode on stately horses, while the nobles were degraded and had to tramp through the mire;† the race was not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the learned.‡ The most eminent public services were suffered to pass unrewarded and were forgotten the moment the need for them was past.§ Property was so insecure that to amass wealth was only to multiply extortions and to fall a prey to the cupidity of princes and judges; insomuch that the sluggard who folded his hands so long as he had mere bread to eat was esteemed wiser than the diligent merchant who applied himself to the labours of traffic.|| Life was as insecure as property, and stood at the mere caprice of men who were slaves to their own lusts; a hasty word spoken in the divan of any one of the Satraps, or even a resentful gesture, might provoke the most terrible outrages.¶ The true re-

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\* Chap. x. 16.

§ Chap. ix. 14, 15.

† Chap. x. 6, 7.

|| Chap. iv. 5, 6.

‡ Chap. ix. 11.

¶ Chap. viii. 3, 4; x. 4.

lation between the sexes was violated ; the ruling classes crowding their harems with concubines, and even the wiser sort of men taking to themselves whatever woman they desired ; while all, with cynical injustice, first degraded women, and then condemned them as alike and altogether bad, with chains for hands and a snare in place of a heart.\* The oppressions of the time were so constant, so cruel, and life grew so dark beneath them, that those who died long ago were happier than those who were still alive ; while happier than either were those who had not been born to see the intolerable evils on which the sun looked calmly down day after day.† In fine, the whole fabric of the State was fast falling into ruin and decay through the greed and sloth of rulers who taxed the people to the very uttermost in order to supply their wasteful luxury ;‡ while yet, so dreadful was their tyranny and their spies so ubiquitous, that no man dared breathe a word against them even to the wife of his bosom and in the secrecy of his bedchamber :§ the only consolation of the oppressed was the grim hope that a time of retribution would overtake their tyrants from which neither power nor craft should be able to save them.||

Nothing would be more difficult than to accept this as a picture of the social and political features of the Hebrew

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\* Chap. vii. 26, 28 ; ix. 9.

† Chap. iv. 1—3.

‡ Chap. x. 18, 19.

§ Chap. x. 20.

|| Chap. viii. 5—8.

State during the reign of Solomon. Nothing could well be more incredible than that this should be intended as a picture of his reign, save that it should be a picture *drawn by his own hand* ! To suppose Solomon the author of this book is to suppose that the wisest of kings and of men was base enough to pen a deliberate and malignant libel on himself, his time, and his realm ! While, on the other hand, this description, dark and lurid as it is, exactly accords with all we know of the terrible condition of the Jews who wept in captivity by the waters of Babylon. In all probability, therefore, as the most competent authorities are agreed, the Book is a parable rather than a history, written by an unknown author, during the Captivity, in what is known as the Rabbinical period of Hebrew literature,—certainly not before B.C. 500, and probably somewhat later.\*

Nor is this inference, drawn from the style and general contents of the Book, unsupported by verses in it which at first sight seem altogether opposed to such an inference. All the special and direct indications of authorship contained in Ecclesiastes are to be found in the First Chapter.

The very first verse runs, "The Words of the Preacher, son of David, King in Jerusalem." Now David had only one son who was King in Jerusalem, viz., Solomon ; the verse therefore seems to fix the authorship on Solomon

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\* *The fourth century, B.C., is its most probable date.*



beyond dispute. Simple and logical as that conclusion seems, it is nevertheless untenable. For observe (1), that in the known and admitted works of the Wise King, he distinctly and directly claims the authorship. The Book of Proverbs commences with "The Proverbs of *Solomon*," and the Canticles with "The Song of Songs which is *Solomon's*." But the Book Ecclesiastes does not once mention his name, though it speaks of a "son of David." Instead of calling this son of David Solomon, it calls him "*Cohелеth*," or, as we translate the word, "The Preacher." Now the word "*Cohелеth*" is not a masculine noun as the name of a man should be, but a feminine and abstract noun. It denotes, not an actual man, but an abstraction, a personification, such, for instance, as "Wisdom" or "Virtue;" it implies therefore that it is not the real, but a fictitious Solomon who is about to speak to us, that Solomon is not the author of the Book, but a person in the Drama it presents. (2). This "Son of David," we are told, was "*King in Jerusalem*;" and in the precise Hebrew use of words the phrase indicates that the Book was written at a time when there either were or had been Hebrew Kings *out of* Jerusalem, when Jerusalem was not the only site of a royal throne, and therefore after the disruption of Solomon's realm into the rival kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It is even possible that the phrase may imply the Book to have been written when there was no longer any King in Jerusalem. (3). Again, we find *Cohелеth*

affirming (12 v.), "I *was* King over Israel in Jerusalem," and (16 v.), "I acquired greater wisdom than *all* who were before me in Jerusalem." Now, to say nothing of the questionable modesty of the latter sentence, if it fell from Solomon's pen, you will observe that it claims for him more than *all* ("all kings," *i.e.*, say the Commentators) who were before him. But when Solomon sat on his throne in Jerusalem, he was only the second occupant of it; for Jebus, or Jerusalem, was only conquered from a Philistine clan by his father David. And if there had been only one, how could he speak of "all" who preceded him? (4). And still further, the tense of the verb in that phrase "I *was* King over Israel" indicates that when the Book was written Solomon was no longer King. It means, "I was king but I am king no more." Yet we know that Solomon reigned over Israel to the day of his death, that there never was a day on which he could have strictly used such a tense as this. So clear and undisputed is the force of this Hebrew verb that even the Rabbis, who held and hold Solomon to be the author of Ecclesiastes, were obliged to invent a tradition to account for its use. And a very pretty pathetic tradition it is. They said: "When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart was greatly lifted up within him by his prosperity, and he transgressed the commandments of God, gathering to him many horses and chariots and riders, amassing much gold and silver, and marrying many wives

of foreign extraction. Wherefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and He sent against him Ashmodai, the ruler of the demons ; and he drave him from the throne of his kingdom, and took away the ring from his hand (Solomon's ring is famous for its marvellous powers in all Oriental fable), and sent him forth to wander about the world. And he went through the villages and cities, with a staff in his hand, weeping and lamenting, and saying, 'I am Coheleth ; I was beforetime Solomon, and reigned over Israel in Jerusalem ; but now I rule over only this staff.' " We cannot but love this story for its beauty and pathos : and, though of course we must not accept it as history, we may learn from it that, even in the judgment of the Rabbis, the Book Ecclesiastes must, on its own showing, have been written after Solomon had ceased to be king, *i.e.*, after his death : the Rabbis are " hoist with their own petard."

So that all the phrases in this Book which are indicative of its authorship rather confirm than weaken the inference drawn from its style and contents : viz., that it was not written by Solomon, nor in his reign, but by a Rabbi of a long-subsequent period, who, by a dramatic impersonation of the experiences of Solomon, or of his own experiences combined with the Solomonic traditions, sought to carry comfort and instruction to his oppressed countrymen.

But perhaps the most convincing argument in favour of

this conclusion is, that, when once we think of it, we cannot possibly accept the Solomon set before us in Ecclesiastes as the Solomon depicted in the Historical Books. Solomon, the Son of David, with all his wisdom, played the fool. The foremost man and Hebrew of his time, he gave his heart to "strange women," and to gods whose ritual was, not only idolatrous, but cruel, dark, impure. In his pursuit of science, unless the whole East belie him, he ran into secret magical arts,—incantations, divinations, an occult intercourse with demons or supposed demons. In all ways he departed from the God who had enriched him with the choicest gifts, and sank through luxury and excess, first into a premature old age,\* and then into a death so hopeless, so unrelieved by any sign of penitence or any promise of amendment, that from that day to this rabbis and divines have discussed his final doom, many of them inclining to the darker alternative. This is the Solomon of History. But the Solomon of Ecclesiastes is a sage who conducts moral experiments for the good of the race, in order that with all the weight of manifold experience he may teach men what is that good and right way which alone leads to peace. Now, however hardly we may think of the Wise King who was guilty of so

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\* Solomon could not have been more than sixty years of age when he died; yet it was not till he was "*old*" that his wives "turned away his heart from the Lord his God."—1 Kings xi. 4.

many follies, we can hardly think of him as such a fool that he did not know his sins to be sins, or as such a knave that he deliberately endeavoured to palm them on after ages, not as transgressions of the Divine Law, but as a series of delicate philosophic experiments which he was kind enough to conduct for the benefit of mankind. Even if we can conceive of him as thus seeking to cloak and palliate his sins, we may be very sure that the book in which he made so shameless an attempt would not have been admitted into the Sacred Canon.

On the whole, then, we conclude that, in this Book, Solomon is taken as the Hebrew type of wisdom—the wisdom which is based on large varied experience; and that this experience is here dramatized for the instruction of a people who from first to last, from the fable of Jotham to the parables of our Lord, were accustomed to receive moral instruction in fictitious and dramatic forms. Its author was not Solomon, but some unnamed Rabbi; it was written, not in the time of Solomon, *i.e.* about 1000 B.C., but some five or six centuries later; and it was addressed, not to the free, wealthy, cultured subjects of the Wise King, but to their degenerate descendants when these were enduring the wrongs and oppressions of the Persian Captivity.

As for the form and design of the Book there is no question that it sets before us the Quest of the *Summum Bonum*, the Search for the Chief Good. Its main immediate design was to deliver the exiled Jews from the

misleading theories of morals current among them, from the sensualism and scepticism caused by their imperfect conceptions of the Divine Providence, by showing them that the true Good of life is not to be secured by philosophy, by the pursuit of pleasure, by devotion to business, by amassing wealth ; but that it results from a temperate enjoyment of the daily gifts of the Divine bounty, and a patient endurance of inevitable calamities, combined with the sincere service of God and a steadfast faith in that future life in which all wrongs will be righted and all the problems of providential rule will receive a triumphant solution. Instead of setting forth these truths in a metaphysical treatise, or a moral essay, or even in an authentic biography, our author throws them into a dramatic form. Availing himself of the historical and traditional records of Solomon's life, he depicts him as conducting a series of moral experiments, as testing the claims of Wisdom, Mirth, Affairs, Wealth, and as finding them all incompetent to satisfy the cravings of his soul ; as attaining no rest or peace until he had learned a simple enjoyment of simple pleasures, a patient constancy under heavy trials, a heartfelt devotion to the service of God, and an unwavering faith in that future life whose dark portal men name Death.

This Drama consists of a Prologue, Four Acts or Sections, and an Epilogue.

In the Prologue (Chap. I. vv. 1 to 11), Coheleth states the Problem to be solved.



In the First Section (Chap. I. v. 12, to Chap. II. v. 26), he depicts the endeavour to solve it by seeking the Chief Good in Wisdom and Pleasure :

In the Second Section (Chap. III. v. 1, to Chap. V. v. 19), the Quest is pursued in Traffic and Political Life:

In the Third Section (Chap. VI. v. 1, to Chap. VIII. v. 15), the Quest is carried into Wealth and into the Golden Mean :

In the Fourth Section (Chap. VIII. v. 16, to Chap. XII. v. 7), the Quest is Achieved, and the Chief Good found to consist in a tranquil and cheerful enjoyment of the Present Life combined with a cordial faith in the Life to come.

And in the Epilogue (Chap. XII. vv. 8 to 14), Coheleth summarizes and emphatically repeats this solution of the Problem of the Book.

Now it was very natural that the Providential problem here discussed should fill a large space in Hebrew thought and literature ; that it should be, as you remember it was, the theme of many of the Psalms and of many of the prophetic "burdens" as well as of the Books Ecclesiastes and Job. For the Hebrew Revelation did teach that virtue and vice would meet suitable rewards in the present life. At the giving of the Law Jehovah announced that He would show mercy to the thousands of those who kept His commandments, and that He would visit the iniquities of the disobedient upon them to the third and fourth gene-

rations. The Pentateuch is crowded with promises of temporal good to the righteous, and with threatenings of temporal evil to the unrighteous. The fulfilments of these threatenings and promises are carefully marked in the Hebrew Chronicles; their fulfilment is the supplication which breathes through the recorded prayers of the Hebrew race and the theme of their noblest songs; it is their hope and consolation under the heaviest calamities that befall them. What then could be more bewildering to a pious reflective Jew than to discover that this fundamental article of his faith was questionable, nay, that it was contradicted by the commonest facts of life. When he saw the righteous driven before the blasts of Adversity like a withered leaf, while the wicked lived out all their days in mirth and affluence; when he saw the only nation that attempted obedience to a Divine Law groaning under the evils of a captivity embittered by the cruel caprices of an Oriental despotism and unrelieved by any hope of deliverance, while heathen races revelled in the lusts of sense and power unrebuked; when *this* seemed to be the rule of Providence, *the law* of the Divine administration, and not that better rule revealed in his Scriptures: is it any wonder that, forgetting all corrective and balancing facts, he was racked with torments of perplexity; that, while many of his fellows plunged into the base relief of sensualism, he should be plagued with doubts and fears, and search eagerly through all avenues of thought for some solution to the



problem which haunted his mind with its suggestions of despair?

Nor indeed is this problem without interest for us: for we as persistently misinterpret the New Testament as ever the Hebrews did the Old. We read that "whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap;" we read that "the meek shall inherit the earth;" we read that for every act of service done to Christ we shall receive "a hundredfold now in this present time:" and we are very ready with the gross careless interpretation which makes such passages mean that if we are good we shall have the good things of this life, while its evil things shall be reserved for the evil. Indeed we are trained in this interpretation from our earliest years. Our very spelling-books are full of it, and are framed on the model of "Johnny was a good boy and he got plum-cake, but Tommy was a bad boy and he got the stick." Nearly all our story-books have a similar moral: it is always the good young man who gets the beautiful wife and large estate, while the bad young man comes to a bad end. Our proverbs are full of it, and axioms such as "Honesty is the best policy," a pernicious half-truth, are for ever on our lips. Our art, in so far as it is *ours*, is in the same story. In Hogarth, for instance, as Thackeray has pointed out, it is always Francis Goodchild who comes to be Lord Mayor, and poor Tom Scapegrace who comes to the gallows. And when, as life passes on, we discover that it is the bad boy who often

gets most plum-cake and the good boy who goes to the rod, that bad men often have beautiful wives and large estates, while good men fail of both; when we find the knave rising to place and authority and honest Goodchild in the workhouse or the Gazette; when we see the fraudulent contractor lifted to the peerage, or stockbrokers who have rigged the market and railway directors who have sworn to false balance-sheets settling down into wealthy church-going country gentlemen: then there rise up in our hearts the very scepticisms and perplexities and eager painful questions which of old time troubled the hearts of Psalmist and Prophet. We cry out with Job,—

It is all one—therefore will I say it,  
The guiltless and the guilty He treateth alike;  
The deceiver and the deceived both are His:

or we say with the Preacher,—

This is the greatest evil of all that is done under the sun,  
That there is one fate for all;  
The same fate befallerh to the righteous and to the wicked,  
To the good and pure and to the impure,  
To him that sacrificerh and to him that sacrificerh not:  
As is the good so is the sinner,  
And he that sweareth as he that feareth an oath.

Well for us if, like the Hebrew Dramatist, we can resist this cruel temptation and hold fast the integrity of our faith; if we can rest in the assurance that, after all and when all is done, “the little that a righteous man hath is

better than the riches of many wicked;" that God has something better than lucky haps and prosperous fortune for the good, and merciful correctives of a more sovereign potency than penury and mishaps for the wicked! If we have this faith, our study of Ecclesiastes can hardly fail to establish and confirm it: if we are not so happy as to have it, Coheleth will give us sound reasons for embracing it.

## § 2. *On the History of the Captivity.*

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If we may now assume the Book Ecclesiastes to have been written during the Babylonian Captivity, our next duty is to learn what we can of the social, political, and religious condition of the races among whom the Jews were thrown. That they learned much as well as suffered much while they sat by the waters of Babylon; that they emerged from their long exile with a profound attachment to the Word of God such as their fathers had never known, and with many most precious additions to that Word, is beyond a doubt. As plants grow fastest by night, so men make their most rapid increase in knowledge and faith when times are dark and troubled. And all students of

the period are at one in affirming that during the Captivity a radical and most happy change passed upon the Hebrew mind. They came out of it with a hatred of idolatry, a faith in the life beyond the grave, a pride in their national Law, a hope in the advent of the Great Deliverer and Redeemer, with which the elder Psalmists and Prophets had failed to inspire them, but which henceforth they never relinquished. With the religious there was blended an intellectual advance. Books and teachers were sought and honoured as never heretofore. Schools and synagogues sprang up in every town and village in which they dwelt. Of making of many books there was no end. Education was compulsory. Study, as we learn from the Hebrew proverbs, was regarded as more meritorious than sacrifice, a scholar as greater than a prophet, a teacher as greater than a king. Before the Captivity one of the most illiterate of nations, at its close the Jews were distinguished for their literary activity and a passionate zeal for education and intellectual culture.

To trace the progress of this marvellous revival of letters and religion, to weigh and appraise the various influences which contributed to it, would be a most welcome task, had we only the materials for it and the skill to use them. I have neither. Even the scanty materials that exist lie scattered through the literary and historic remains of many different races,—in the cylinders, sculptures, paintings, inscriptions, tombs, shrines of Nineveh,

Babylon, and Persepolis ; in the sacred Zendavesta, in the pages of Herodotus and the earlier Greek historians, in Josephus, in the Apocrypha, and in at least a dozen of the Old Testament Books. Probably there are not more than two or three scholars in England\* who could write the unwritten history of this period; and even they, through lack of materials, could only write it in part. Yet what period is of greater interest to the student of the Bible? A large number of the Old Testament Books, far larger than is commonly supposed, belong to this time; the Books of Ezra, Nchemiah, and Esther, for instance, among the historical writings, and among the prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi; many of the Psalms, too, are of this date; many of the prophecies of Isaiah and of the Minor Prophets cotemporary with him refer to it; at least portions of the Books of Kings and Chronicles must have been written in it, and the Book Ecclesiastes was its direct offspring. So that could we recover its history as written from the secular side, that history would throw new and most welcome light on well-nigh one half of the Old Testament Scriptures.

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\* Sir Henry Rawlinson and Emmanuel Deutsch are two of these scholars; the third is the Rev. George Rawlinson, to whose work on "The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World" I am largely indebted for the historical facts given in the following pages, as also to his "Herodotus" and to his Articles in Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible." I know of no fourth.

Happily it is no part of my duty so much as to attempt this arduous hopeless task. It will be enough if I give you such a sketch of the history of Babylon during the Hebrew Captivity as will show you how, from their contact with the Babylonian and Persian races, the Jews received educational and religious impulses which go far to account for the marvellous change which passed upon them,—such a sketch as will enable you to read “the Preacher” intelligently and see how all his social and political allusions exactly correspond with what we know of that time.

About a hundred and twenty years after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel by Shalmaneser King of Assyria (B.C. 719), the Kingdom of Judah fell before Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon (B.C. 598—596). The city, palace, and temple of Jerusalem were levelled in a common ruin ; the nobles, priests, merchants, and skilled artizans, all the pith and manhood of Judah were carried away captive : only a few of the lowest of the people were left to mourn and starve amid the ravaged fields. Nothing could present a more striking contrast to their native land than the region to which the Jews were transferred. Instead of a picturesque mountain country, with its little cities set on hills or on the brink of precipitous ravines, they entered on a vast plain, fertile beyond all precedent indeed, and abounding in streams, but with nothing to break the monotony

of level flats save the high walls and lofty towers of one enormous city. For Babylonia Proper was simply an immense plain (more strictly speaking, it consisted of two plains) lying between the Arabian Desert and the Tigris, and of an extent somewhat under that of Ireland. But though of a limited area as compared with the vast empire of which it was the centre, owing to its amazing fertility it was capable of sustaining a crowded population. It was watered not only by the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, but by their numerous affluents, many of which were themselves considerable streams, and it "was a land of brooks and fountains." On these rich alluvial plains, amply supplied with water, under the fierce heat of an Eastern sun, wheat and barley were indigenous and yielded a return far beyond all modern parallel. Nowhere else on the face of the earth, so far as we know, is wheat a weed springing spontaneously from the soil: and in this its native habitat it bore fruit two-hundred-fold, and, if some ancient writers are to be credited, even three-hundred-fold—between ten and fifteen times as much as it now yields in England.\*

Babylon, the capital city of this fertile province, was

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\* "Of all the countries that we know, none is so fruitful in grain. . . . It is so fruitful as to yield commonly two-hundred-fold, and when the production is the greatest, even three-hundred-fold. The blade of the wheat-plant and barley-plant is often four fingers in breadth."—*Herodotus*, Book I., chap. 193.



the largest and most magnificent city of the ancient world. It stood on both sides of the river Euphrates, as London stands on both sides of the Thames ; but it was “nearly five times the size of London.” It covered at least a hundred square miles, and was defended by broad massive walls of a hundred feet in height and about forty miles in circumference. These walls were pierced by a hundred gates, twenty-five, it is supposed, on each face ; and the main streets of the city, which was a vast square laid out with mathematical precision, ran across from gate to gate. The river Euphrates flowed through the middle of the city. “Its banks were built throughout with quays of brick, laid in bitumen, and were further guarded by two walls of brick which skirted them along their whole length.” There was an access to the river at the end of every main street, defended by a brazen gate, and furnished with ferryboats for the convenience of those who wished to cross the stream. Of course this vast area was not covered with continuous streets of houses, some of which, by the bye, were three or four stories high. In the better quarters of the town the palaces of the King and his princes were surrounded by gardens, parks, orchards, paradises,—one of which, we are told, extended over eight miles. Nevertheless in the time of its prosperity the population must have been enormous, and its broad streets crowded with merchants, traders, soldiers, and pilgrims of every race.



In this country and city (for "Babylon" stands for both in the Bible), so unlike the sunny cliffs and scattered villages of their native land, the Jews, who like all hill-races had a passionate affection for the land of their fathers, spent many bitter years. On these broad featureless plains they pined for "the mountains" of Judea;\* they sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept as they remembered "the hill of the Lord." They do not seem, however, to have been handled with any exceptional harshness by their captors. They were treated as colonists rather than as slaves. They were allowed to live together in considerable numbers, and to observe their own religious rites. They took the advice of prophet Jeremiah,† who had warned them that their exile would extend over many years, and built houses, planted gardens, married wives, and brought up children; they "sought the peace of the city" in which they were captives, "and prayed for it," knowing that in its peace they would have peace. If many of them had to labour gratuitously, as most of the conquered races had, on the great public works, many rose by fidelity, thrift, and diligence to places of trust and amassed considerable wealth. Among other Jews who filled high posts in the household or administration of the successive monarchs of Babylon were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah;

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\* Ezekiel xiii., and Psalm cxxxvii.

† Jeremiah xxix. 4—7.

Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Mordecai ; Tobit — if indeed Tobit be a real and not a fictitious person—and his nephew Achiacharus.

But who were the people, and what the social and political conditions of the people, among whom the Hebrew captives lived ? The two leading races with whom they were brought in contact were the Babylonians—an offshoot from the ancient Chaldean stock—and the Persians. The history of the Captivity divides itself into two main periods, the Persian and the Babylonian, of each of which we must form as accurate a conception as we can.

1. *The Babylonian Period.*—For more than fifty years after they were carried away captive the Jews lived among the Chaldean race and were governed by Assyrian despots of whom Nebuchadnezzar was by far the greatest, whether in peace or war. It is hardly too much to say that but for him the Babylonians would have had no place in history. A great soldier, a great statesman, a great builder and engineer, he knew how to consolidate his immense conquests, and to adorn his vast empire—an empire which, if historians speak the truth, “extended from the Atlantic to the Caspian, and from Caucasus to the Great Sahara.” As yet, however, we owe—and till the Assyrian inscriptions are more fully and certainly translated, we must owe—our best conception of the personal character and private

life of this great despot to the Book of Daniel. Daniel, although a Jew and a captive, was the vizier of the Babylonian monarch, and retained his high post until the Persian conquest, when he became the first of "the three presidents" of the new empire. He therefore paints Nebuchadnezzar from the life. And in his Book\* we see the great king at the head of a magnificent court, surrounded by "princes, governors, and captains, judges, treasurers, councillors, and sheriffs," waited on by "well-favoured" eunuchs, attended by a crowd of astrologers and "wise men" who interpret to him the will of heaven. He is of an absolute power, and disposes with a word of the lives and fortunes of his subjects, even the highest and most princely. All offices are in his gift. He can raise a slave to the second place in his kingdom (Daniel, to wit), and impose a foreigner (again, Daniel) on the priestly college as its head. Of so enormous a wealth that he makes an image of pure gold ninety feet high and nine feet broad, he lavishes it on public works—on temples, gardens, canals, walls—rather than on personal indulgence. Religious after a fashion, he wavers between "the God of the Jews" and the deity whom he calls "*his* god." In temper he is hasty and violent, but not obstinate; he

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\* See Rawlinson's "Five Monarchies," vol. iii., chap. viii., pp. 499—501.

suddenly repents of his sudden resolves; he is capable of bursts of gratitude and devotion no less than of fierce accesses of fury, and displays at times a piety and self-abasement astonishing in an Oriental despot. His successors—Evil-Merodach, Neriglissar, Laborosoarchod, Nabonadius, and Belshazzar—need not detain us. Little is known of them. With one exception, that of Nabonadius, their reigns were very short; and their main task seems to have been the erection of vast and sumptuous structures such as Nebuchadnezzar had been the first to rear. Probably none of them save Nebuchadnezzar made any deep impression on the Hebrew mind.

And indeed the people of Babylon were much more likely than their despots to contribute to the formation of a new character in their captives. For with the people the Jews would be in daily contact and could not fail to be influenced by it. Now the Babylonians were marked by great intellectual ability. Keen to know, patient to observe, exact and laborious in their researches, their inferences, their conclusions, they could hardly fail to teach much to subject races and to inspire them with an ardent desire for knowledge. They had carried the sciences of astronomy and mathematics to a high pitch of perfection. By careful observations, by difficult and complicated calculations, they had succeeded in laying down the Zodiacal path—the constellations through which the sun passes—the courses of the planets, the recurrence and

causes of eclipses.\* They determined within two seconds the exact length of the solar year; they were not far wrong in the distances at which they computed the sun, moon, and planets from the earth: and they compiled a serviceable catalogue of the fixed stars. It is strongly affirmed that they had discovered the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, in which case, as these moons are not discernible even in an Eastern heaven by the naked eye, they must have invented the telescope and learned to use it with good effect. The sun-dial is certainly, the astrolabe probably, of their invention. The Hebrew prophets often refer to their "wisdom and learning." The Greeks laud their "inventions" and accept the scientific data they had laid down. And though many of their wise men fell from astronomy into astrology, and from scientific observers into magi who professed to cast nativities, expound dreams, and foretell things to come, yet even in their study of the dark erratic shadows cast by the light of Science they, like the Alchymists of the middle ages, often lit on happy results.

The Babylonians excelled in architecture. Two of their vast structures, the Walls of Babylon and the Hanging Gardens, were reckoned among the Seven Wonders of the

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\* How accurately they observed the eclipses of the moon may be inferred from the fact that some of their observations have been recently tested, and found "to answer all the requirements of modern science."

World. Their skill in manufacturing and arranging enamelled bricks\* has never yet been equalled by any other people: we, who need that art so much, might well learn of builders who died two thousand five hundred years ago. In all mechanical arts indeed—such as cutting stones and gems, casting gold and silver, blowing glass, modelling vases and ware, weaving carpets and muslins and linen,—they take a very high place among the nations of antiquity; in some, the very highest; their textile fabrics, for instance, being rated far above those of any of their rivals. With manufacturing skill they combined the spirit of enterprise and adventure which leads men to engage in commerce. They were addicted to maritime pursuits and excelled in them: “the cry” or joy “of the Chaldeans is in their ships,” says Isaiah;† and Ezekiel‡ calls Babylonia “a land of traffic,” and its chief city “a city of merchants.”

But a large, and probably the largest, section of the people must have been occupied with the toils of agriculture; the broad Chaldean plain, with its magnificent rivers, being famous, from the time of the patriarchs to the present day, for a fertility unequalled by other lands and well-nigh incredible. Wheat, barley, millet, and sesame

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\* There is a curious allusion to these enamelled bricks and the admiration Jews conceived for them in Ezekiel xxiii. 14—16,

† Isaiah xlii. 14.

‡ Ezekiel xvii. 4.



all flourished with astonishing luxuriance, the ground commonly returning a hundredfold, two hundredfold, and even ampler rewards for the toil of the husbandman.

With all these abundant sources of wealth at their command, the people naturally grew luxurious and dissolute. "The daughter of the Chaldeans," as we learn from Isaiah,\* was "tender and delicate," given to pleasures, apt to dwell carelessly: her young men, says Ezekiel,† made themselves "as princes to look at, exceeding in dyed attire upon their heads" (lofty fluted caps of many colours), painting their faces, wearing earrings, and clothing themselves in soft and rich apparel. Chastity, in our modern sense of the term, was unknown; every Babylonian woman, however highborn and delicately reared, having to prostitute herself once in her life as an act of religious duty in the temple of Beltis.‡ The pleasures of the table were carried to excess; drunkenness was common and customary: to gratify animal passions was to serve the gods. Yet, like many other Eastern races, the Babylonians hid under their soft luxurious exterior a fierceness very formidable to their foes. The Hebrew prophets§ describe them as "a bitter and hasty," a "terrible and dreadful"

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\* Isaiah xlvii. 1—8.

† Ezekiel xxiii. 15.

‡ That this "most shameful custom" really obtained among the Babylonians is put beyond doubt by Herodotus (Book I., chap. 199), Strabo (xvi., p. 1058), and the Book of Baruch (chap. vi. 43).

§ Habakkuk i. 6—8, and Isaiah xiv. 16.

people, "fiercer than the evening wolves," a people who "made the earth tremble and did shake kingdoms:" and all the historians of that time charge them with a thirst for blood which often took the most savage and inhuman forms. Nor was this fierceness shown only to subject races, to captives and slaves. The highest nobles trembled for their heads if by the slightest fault they incurred the despot's displeasure; the whole college of "wise men" was, as Daniel\* tells us, all but cut off because they could not expound a dream which Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed and forgotten. Death was not considered a sufficient punishment for a serious offence unless preceded by torture. Offenders were slowly hacked to pieces, or cast into a furnace of fire; their whole family often sharing their fate.

Of the horrible licence and cruelty of the Babylonian worship of Bel, Merodach, and Nebo, which did much to foster the savage cruel temper of the people, it is not necessary, it is hardly possible, to speak. Roughly taken, it was the service of the great forces of Nature by a frightful indulgence of the worst passions of man. It is enough to know that in Babylon idolatry took forms which henceforth made all forms of idolatry intolerable to the Jews; that now, once for all, they renounced that wor-

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\* Daniel ii. 13.



ship of strange gods to which they and their fathers had always hitherto been prone. This of itself was an immense advance, a great gain. Nor was it their only gain: for, if by contact with the idolatrous Babylonians the Jews were driven back upon their own Law and Scripture, their contact with a people of so active an intellect and a learning so profound led them to study the Word of Jehovah in a new and more intelligent spirit, to penetrate more profoundly into its meaning, and prepared them to value and pursue that intellectual culture which heretofore they had too much despised.\* Nor is it less obvious that in the social and political conditions of the Babylonians we have the key to many of the allusions to public life contained in Ecclesiastes. The great Empire, indeed, presents precisely those elements which in degenerate times and under feeble despots must inevitably develope into the disorder and misery and crime which Coheleth depicts.

2. *The Persian Period.*—The conquest of Babylon by the Persians is, thanks to Daniel, one of the most familiar incidents of ancient history. The defence of that city against the open and direct assaults of his troops had

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\* I have described at some length the marvellous outburst of literary and educational activity which followed the Exile in the Exposition of chap. xii., verses 9 to 12, and therefore need only allude to it here.

been so skilful that Cyrus despaired of success. As a last resource, he ventured on a stratagem so hazardous as to prove that he at least did not fear

To put his fortune to the touch,  
And win or lose it all.

Withdrawing his forces from the environs of the city, he retired] to a distance along the banks of the Euphrates. Here, selecting a suitable spot, he set his troops to cut channels by which the main volume of its waters might be diverted from their course. When the channels were cut he waited for the arrival of a great feast in which, to pay due honour to their gods, the whole population was wont to indulge in drunken revelry. The feast came, and was kept with unusual splendour and extravagance. As though to mark his contempt for the enemy, Belshazzar abandoned himself to the spirit of the hour and gave a drinking banquet to a thousand of his lords. The whole city, with steady loyalty, followed the example of the king, and plunged into a "pious orgy" in which riot and excess were blended with religious frenzy. The public danger was forgotten, every precaution neglected. The river gates were neither closed nor guarded. A single sentinel might have saved the city. Meantime the Persians opened their sluices and let off the water till the river became fordable. They marched on and on for miles between the lofty massive walls which protected the banks of the stream, and in

which, as Herodotus remarks,\* had they been detected, they would have been caught "as in a trap" and destroyed man by man without any possibility of escape or defence. They reached the unclosed gates which led up from the banks of the river to the heart of the city. They rose like shadows in the darkness from the stream—formed into column—advanced; and then commenced a slaughter grim and great. The drunken revellers could render no resistance. The King was paralysed with fear at the miraculous handwriting which sprang from the wall of his banqueting-room to announce that he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The Persians burst into the palace, and slew him and his lords in the midst of their orgy. They carried fire and sword through the city. When the morning broke, the empire had passed from the Babylonian to the Persian dynasty.

By this conquest the heroic Cyrus—"the Shepherd, the Messiah of the Lord," as Isaiah† terms him—he had already conquered the King of Lydia, Cræsus, whose name is a fable of wealth to this day—became the undisputed master of well-nigh the whole known world. Nor does he seem to have been unworthy of his extraordinary position. Of all ancient Oriental monarchs, out of the Hebrew pale, he bears the highest repute. Active, heroically brave, with

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\* Herodotus I., 191.

† Isaiah xliv. 28; xlv. 1.

a capacity for military affairs seldom equalled, he was simple in his habits, and of a most just, humane, and clement spirit. For many generations he was fondly remembered as "the father of his people."

Cyrus was sixty years of age when he conquered Babylon (B.C. 539), and died ten years after the conquest in a petty and obscure conflict. He was succeeded (B.C. 529) by his son Cambyses, a despot possessed by the lust of conquest, but with neither his father's military capacity nor the blended justice and clemency by which Cyrus attached conquered races to his rule. One of his earliest acts was the privy murder of his brother Smerdis. From his sin sprang his punishment. So secretly was the murder effected that the very fact of his brother's death was doubted, and thus an opportunity was offered for personation—a crime very common in the East. The Magi put forward a Magus who resembled the murdered Smerdis in face and person: the people hailed him as the veritable son of the great King. Cambyses, who had already alienated them by his cruel despotic humours, was on his return from the subjugation of Egypt when tidings of the revolt reached him; and, rather than dare an encounter with the rebels, committed an inglorious suicide. The precautions of the pseudo-Smerdis, however, his fear of being seen and questioned, betrayed the imposture of the priests. The nobles, headed by Darius Hystaspes, an heir of the ancient Achemænian dynasty, rose against him, and Darius reigned in his stead.

Darius was the great statesman of the Persian dynasty, as Cyrus was its great soldier. He founded the "Satrapial" form of administration : *i.e.*, instead of governing the various provinces of his empire through native princes, he placed a Persian as satrap over each, this satrap being charged with the collection of the public revenues, the maintenance of order, and the administration of justice ; in fact, he governed the whole Eastern world pretty much as we govern India now. The satraps were selected by the King himself, and were responsible to him alone : but as checks on their greed and ambition, an independent military commander was also appointed by the King to each of the provinces, and a secretary who was the "King's Eye and Ear," and whose main function was to keep the Court informed by his despatches of all that took place. So that no satrap could revolt with any prospect of success until he had gained over the Commander of the forces and the royal Secretary, their interest being to hold him in check. By competent judges this mode of administration, of which I have given only a bare outline, is admired as the most perfect of any devised in ancient times, as the mode most likely to preserve the stability and order of the vast unwieldy empires which then stretched from India to Europe. The internal organization of the Empire was the great work of Darius through his long reign of six-and-thirty years ; but the event by which he is best remembered, and which proved to be fruitful in the most disastrous results

to the State, was the commencement of that fatal war with the Greeks which at last reached its close in the downfall of the Persian Empire.

His son Xerxes succeeded to the throne in the year B.C. 486, and reigned twenty-one years. Saving for an occasional act of generosity, Xerxes was as contemptible an instance of the Oriental despot as can well be found. Selfish, fickle, boastful, passionate, licentious, cruel, of a weak brain and a bad heart, he ran an undeviating career of folly and vice. The story of his war with Greece, of the conquest of his millions by the hundreds of Athens and Sparta, is told in our school-books, and need not be repeated here. The very traits in his character which the Greeks noted for their contempt appear, as we shall soon see, in a picture of him drawn by an inspired hand.

Xerxes was succeeded by Artaxerxes Longimanus, to whom Nehemiah was cupbearer. He reigned forty years (B.C. 465—425); but though he appears to have been an amiable and kindly man, he was, like many other amiable men, utterly unfit to be a king. Feeble and irresolute, the mere tool of a wicked sister (Amytis) and a yet more wicked mother (Amestris), the slack bands of authority were still further slackened during his long inglorious reign. At his death there naturally occurred a period of anarchy from which one prince rose after another in quick succession, some of them reigning only for a few months,



one for only a few days ; each, with rare exceptions, worse than the last. The decay was only once arrested. Ochus, who made some little stand against it, if an able ruler, was the most cruel, perhaps the only ferocious and blood-thirsty, despot of the Persian dynasty. We need not trace the various issues of this "battle of kites and crows." From the accession of Xerxes (B.C. 486) down to the conquest of the Persians by the Greeks under Alexander the Great (*circa* B.C. 330), the Empire was declining to its fall. Its history is a mere succession of intrigues and insurrections, conspiracies and revolts. "Battle, murder, and sudden death" are its staple. The restraints of law and order grew ever weaker. The satraps were practically supreme in their several provinces, and used their power to extort enormous wealth from their miserable subjects. Eunuchs and concubines ruled in the palace. Manliness died out of the national habits (the Persians were no longer taught "to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth"); cunning and treachery took its place. The scene grows more and more pitiful till at last the welcome darkness rushes down and hides the ignoble agony of perhaps the vastest and wealthiest empire the world has ever seen.

So much for the despots. Let us now attempt to form some acquaintance with the people, the Persian people

who, by the conquest of Cyrus, became the ruling class in the Empire; always remembering, however, that the Babylonians must have remained by myriads both in the capital and in the provinces, and would continue to exert their influence on Hebrew thought and culture.

In all moral and religious qualities the Persians were far in advance of the Chaldeans, though they were probably behind them in many civilized arts. They were famous for their truth and valour. The Greeks\* confessed the Persians to be their equals in "boldness and warlike spirit"—Æschylus† calls them a "valiant-minded people"—while they are lavish in praise of the Persian veracity, a virtue in which they themselves never shone. To the Persians God was "the Father of all truth;" to lie was shameful and irreligious. They disliked traffic because of its haggling, equivocation, and dishonest shifts. They were free and open in their speech, keen of wit, bold in action, generous, cordial, hospitable. "Their chief faults," and even these were not fully developed till they became masters of the world, "were an addiction to self-indulgence and luxury, a passionate *abandon* to the feeling of the hour whatever it might be, and a tameness and subservience in all their relations towards their princes which seem to moderns incompatible with real self-respect and manli-

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\* Herodôtus IX., 62.

† Æschyl. Pers. 94.



ness." Patriotism came to mean mere loyalty to the monarch: the habit of unquestioning submission to his will, and even to his caprice, became a second nature to them. The despotic humour natural in "a ruling person" was thus nourished till it ran to the wildest excess. "He was their lord and master, absolute disposer of their lives, liberties, and property, the sole fountain of law and right, incapable himself of doing wrong, irresponsible, irresistible,—a sort of god upon earth; one whose favour was happiness, at whose frown men trembled, before whom all bowed themselves down with the lowest and humblest obeisance."\* No subject could enter his presence save by special permission, or without a prostration like that of worship. To come unbidden was to be cut down by the royal guards unless, as a sign of grace, he held out his golden sceptre to the culprit. To tread on the king's carpet was a grave offence: to sit, even unwittingly, on his seat a capital crime. So slavish was the submission both of nobles and people that we are required on good authority to accredit such stories as these: wretches bastinadoed by the king's order declared themselves delighted that his majesty had condescended to remember them: a father, whose innocent son was shot by the despot in pure

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\* Rawlinson, from whom I quote, gives abundant authorities for this almost incredible description. He gives chapter and verse for every item in it in his "Five Monarchies."

wantonness, had to crush down his natural indignation and grief, and to compliment the royal archer on the excellence of his shooting.

Despising trade and commerce as menial and degrading, the ruling class of a vast empire, with a monopoly of office and boundless means of wealth at their command, accustomed to lord it over subject races, of a high spirit and a pure faith, their very prosperity was their ruin, as it has been that of many a great nation. In their earlier times, they were noted for their sobriety and temperance. Content with simple diet, their only drink was water from the pure mountain streams; their garb was plain, their habits homely and hardy. But their temperance soon gave place to an immoderate luxury.\* They acquired the Babylonian vices, and adopted at least the licence of the Babylonian rites. They filled their harems with wives and concubines. From the time of Xerxes onwards they grew nice and curious in their appetites, eager for pleasure, effeminate, dissolute. New dishes and new sauces for their table; cosmetics, paint, jewelry, false hair, and costly garments for their personal adornment; rich carpets, soft couches, sumptuous furniture for their houses, became as

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\* "There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. . . . As soon as they hear of any luxury they instantly make it their own. . . . Each of them has several wives, and a still larger number of concubines."—*Herodotus*, Book I., chap. 135.

the necessaries of life to them. "A useless multitude of lazy menials was entertained in all rich households, each servant confining himself rigidly to a single duty, and porters, breadmakers, cooks, cup-bearers, water-bearers, waiters at table, chamberlains, 'awakers,' 'adorners,' all distinct from one another, crowded each noble mansion,\* helping forward the general demoralization."

With this growth of luxury on the part of the nobles and the people, the fear of the despot at whose mercy all their acquisitions stood, grew more intense, more harassing, more degrading. Xerxes and his successors were utterly reckless in their exercise of the absolute irresponsible power conceded to them, and delegated it to favourites as reckless as themselves. No noble however eminent, no servant of the State however faithful or distinguished, could be sure that he might not at any moment incur a displeasure which would strip him of all he possessed, even if it did not also condemn him to a cruel and lingering death. Out of mere sport and wantonness, to relieve the tedium of a weary moment, the despot might slay him with his own hand. For the crime, or supposed crime, of one person, a whole family, or class, or race, might be cut off unheard. Of the lengths to which his cruelty and caprice might go we have a sufficient example

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\* For a description of such a household and its crowd of servants see Ecclesiastes xii. 1—7, and the Commentary on that passage.

in the Book of Esther. The Ahasuerus of that remarkable narrative was, there can hardly be any doubt, the Xerxes of secular history,—the very names,\* unlike as they sound, are the same name differently pronounced by two different races. Everything in this Book is on a colossal scale, down to the caprices of the despot. Xerxes calls a great divan, summoning all the princes and officials of the empire to his palace; in all probability, as Eichhorn has shown, they met to deliberate on the fatal war with Greece. The consultation extends over a “hundred and fourscore days,” the nights of which are given to feasting, and winds up with a seven days’ carousal.† When his heart was “merry with wine,” the king commands that Vashti his queen should be brought into the banqueting-hall to show her beauty to the people and the princes. Now to this day it is a gross indecorum so much as to ask a Persian after the health of his wife, or in any way to allude to her existence. And in the ancient Persian sculptures there is not a single reference to or representation of a woman. The modern reserve is simply a remnant of ancient custom: and therefore the command sent by Xerxes to Vashti was a command to dishonour herself and

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\* Their common root is the Sanscrit *Kshatra*, a king; in the inscriptions of Persepolis this word appears as *Kshérshé*: and from this both the Hebrew *Ahashuerash* (Ahasuerus) and the Greek *Xerxes* would easily be formed.

Esther i. 3—5.

him. She refuses to do him this dishonour; and for crossing his caprice to save his honour she is deposed, repudiated. This was in the third year of his reign.\* And in the seventh year, the year in which he returned defeated from the war with Greece to console himself, as Herodotus† tells us, with the pleasures of the harem, we learn from the Book of Esther that he determined to select a successor to Vashti. All "the fair young virgins" of the empire are at his service; even Mordecai, the rigid Jew, seems to have had no feeling for his niece Esther except the hope that she might please the king. When her turn comes, she is fortunate or unfortunate enough to find "grace and favour;" the king "loves her above all the women" he has seen as yet, and she is made his queen.‡ Mordecai discovers the plot of two eunuchs of the palace against the king's life; Esther warns the king, and the eunuchs are "hanged on a tree." Haman, an Amalekite—a foreigner therefore, and probably a captive—is vizier, and hates the stubborn Hebrew who alone of the king's servants will not bow down before him. What revenge does he propose to take? Simply to destroy the whole people of the Jews. To secure his revenge, he offers the

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\* Comp. Esther i. 3, with Herodotus vii. 7 ff.

† Comp. Herodotus IX. 108, with Esther ii. 1—4, and 16.

‡ There is only too much reason to fear that she degenerated into the cruel and licentious Amestris, the scourge of the Empire during the reign of Artaxerxes her son.

monarch "ten thousand talents of silver," a sum said to be equal to £2,000,000, if only he may have his way. And the wasteful lawless Xerxes is glad to take the money and to seal the decree of extermination. Haman goes home to gloat over his revenge and to build a gallows fifty cubits high from which he hopes to see the detestable Mordecai swing. A royal caprice baulks him of his revenge. The king can't sleep; the chronicles of his reign, fulsome enough no doubt, must be read to him. The book opens on the story of Mordecai's fidelity. "What has been done for him?" asks the king, who had forgotten the man and his service. "Nothing," is the reply. And now Mordecai comes to honour. Mordecai and Esther use their opportunity and beg the lives of their race. The king utters an angry word when Haman is banqueting with him, and "as the word went out of the king's mouth," his attendants "cover Haman's face." He is hanged on the very gallows he had built for the Jew, as are also his ten sons. The Jews are saved: but how? Instead of rescinding his lawless decree, the king issues a decree still more lawless. He had ordered his faithful subjects to fall on the Jews: now he orders the Jews to fight in their own defence. Both decrees are obeyed—obeyed in his very palace, where "five hundred" of his subjects are slain in attempting to execute his order; while in the provinces no less than "seventy and five thousand" find death through their loyalty.



Was there ever a more wicked lawless tragedy? Such a story gives us our profoundest impression of the immense force and sweep of a tyrant's lust and caprice, of the frightful degradation of his subjects, of the utter insecurity of life and fortune under the dark shadow of which the Jews had to spend so many years. Yet this is but a sample of the capricious violence which was habitual with Xerxes. All that the Book of Esther relates of the despot who repudiates a wife because she will not expose herself to the drunken admiration of a crowd of revellers, who raises a servant to the highest honours one day and hangs him the next, who commands the massacre of an entire race and then bids them inflict a horrible carnage on the officers who execute his decree, exactly accords with the Greek narratives which depict him as scourging the sea because it breaks down his bridge over the Hellespont, beheading the engineers whose work was swept away by a storm, wantonly putting to death the sons of Pythias, his oldest friend, before their father's eyes; as first giving to his mistress the splendid robe presented him by his queen and then giving up to the queen's barbarous vengeance the mother of his mistress; as shamefully misusing the body of the brave Leonidas, and after his defeat by the Greeks giving himself up to a criminal voluptuousness and offering a reward to the inventor of a new pleasure.

The Book Ecclesiastes was written certainly not before

the reign of Xerxes '(B.C. 486—465), and probably, some years after it, during that long period of anarchy which followed his reign; and in which, bad as were the conditions of his time, the times grew ever more lawless, despotism more intolerable, the violence and licence of subordinate officials more unblushing. But at whatever period within these limits we may place it, all we have now learned of the Babylonians and Persians during the later years of the Captivity is in entire correspondence with the social and political state depicted by the Preacher. The abler and more kindly despots—as Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes—showed a singular favour to the Jews. Cyrus published a decree permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple and enjoining all the officials of the empire to further them in their enterprise: Darius confirmed that decree, despite the misrepresentations and the vindictive hostility of the Samaritan colonists. Artaxerxes held Ezra and Nehemiah in high esteem and sent them to restore order and prosperity among the returned captives. But a large number, perhaps even a majority, of the Jews, unable or disinclined to return to the city of their fathers, remained in the various provinces of the Great Empire and were subject to the despotic caprice and violence from which the Persians themselves were not exempt. “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” cries the Preacher till we are well-nigh weary of hearing the mournful refrain. Might he not well



take that tone in a time so horribly out of joint, so lowering, so dark? The Book is full of allusions to the Persian luxury, to the Persian forms of administration, above all, to the capricious despotism of the later years of the Persian Empire and the corruptions and miseries it bred. Coheleth's elaborate description\* of the infinite variety of means by which he sought to allure his heart unto mirth—his palaces, vineyards, pleasure-grounds, with their reservoirs and fountains, crowds of attendants, treasures of gold and silver, the harem full of beauties of all races—seems taken direct from the ample state of some Persian grandee. His picture of the public administration† in which “superior watcheth superior, and superiors again watch over them” is a graphic delineation of the satrapial system, with its hierarchy of inferior officers rising grade above grade, which was the work of Darius the Statesman. When the animating spirit of that system was taken away, when weak foolish despots sat on the throne and minor despots just as foolish and weak ruled in every provincial divan, there ensued precisely that political state to which Coheleth perpetually refers.‡ Iniquity sat in the place of judgment, and in the place

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\* Ecc. ii. 4—8.

† *Ibid.* v. 8, 9.

‡ It would be possible to collect from the Psalms of this date materials for a description of the miseries inflicted on the Jews, and their keen sense of them, quite as graphic and intense as that of the Preacher. Here are a few phrases

of equity there was iniquity;\* kings grew childish and princes spent their days in revelry;† fools were lifted to high places while nobles were degraded, and slaves rode on horses while their quondam masters walked

taken from these plaintive and pathetic Psalms. The oppressors of Israel are described as being "clothed with cruelty as with a garment;" as "returning evil for good, and hatred for good-will."

They smite down Thy people, O Jehovah,  
And trouble Thine heritage;  
They murder the widow and the stranger,  
And put the fatherless to death:  
Yet they say, Tush, Jehovah shall not see,  
Neither shall the God of Jacob regard it.—(xciv.)

They revile me, and cease not,  
With shameless mocking, full of lies;  
They gnash upon me with their teeth.—(xxxv.)

I am bowed down, and brought very low;  
I go mourning all the day long:  
Truly, I am nigh unto falling,  
And my heaviness is ever before me.—(xxxviii.)

My days are consumed like smoke,  
And my bones are burned up like a firebrand:  
My heart is smitten down and withered like grass,  
So that I forget to eat my bread.—(cii.)

I am helpless and poor,  
And my heart is wounded within me.—(cix.)

Most of "the imprecatory Psalms" belong to this period; and the terrible wrongs of the Captivity, though they do not justify, in large measure explain and excuse that desire for vengeance which has given so much offence to some of our modern critics.

\* Ecc. iii. 16.

† *Ibid.* x. 16.

upon the ground.\* There was no fair or certain reward for faithful service: the race was not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the learned.† Death brooded in the air, and might fall suddenly and unforeseen on any head however high.‡ To correct a public abuse was like pulling down a wall; some of the stones were sure to fall on the reformer's feet, from some moss-grown cranny a serpent was sure to start out and bite him.§ To breathe a word against a ruler even to one's wife and in the bedchamber was to run the hazard of destruction.|| A resentful gesture, much more a rebellious word in the divan, was enough to provoke the gravest outrage.¶ In short, the whole political fabric was falling into disrepair and decay, the rain leaking through the rotting roof: while the miserable people were ground down with ruinous exactions in order that the rulers might revel on undisturbed.\*\* It is under such a pernicious and ominous maladministration of public affairs and the appalling miseries it breeds, that there springs up in the hearts of men that fatalistic and hopeless temper to which Coheleth gives frequent expression. Better never to have been born, than to live 'a life so thwarted and cramped, so full of perils and fears! Better to snatch at every pleasure, however poor and brief, than seek by self-

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\* Ecc. x. 6, 7.    † *Ibid.* ix. 11.    ‡ *Ibid.* ix. 12.    § *Ibid.* x. 8, 9.  
 || *Ibid.* x. 20.    ¶ *Ibid.* x. 4; viii. 2, 3.    \*\* *Ibid.* x. 18, 19.

denial, by virtue, by integrity to gain a store which the first petty tyrant who gets wind of it will sweep off, or a reputation for wisdom and goodness which will be no protection against the despotic humours of men dressed in a little brief authority!

If our own great poet,\* in an unrestful and despairing mood strangely foreign to his serene temperament, beheld—

. . . . . Desert a beggar born,  
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,  
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,  
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,  
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,  
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,  
And strength by limping sway disabled,  
And art made tongue-tied by authority,  
And folly, doctor like, controlling skill,  
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,  
And captive good attending captain ill;

if, "tired with all these," he cried for "restful death," we can hardly wonder that the Preacher, who had fallen on times so evil that compared with his Shakespeare's were good, should prefer death to life.

But there is another side to this sad Story of the Cap-

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\* Shakespeare's Sonnets, lxi.

tivity, another and a nobler side. If the Jews suffered much from Persian misrule, they learned much and gained much from the Persian faith. In its earliest form the religious creed of the Persians, the creed whose documents Zoroaster afterwards collected and enlarged in the Zend-Avesta, was the purest known to the heathen. Cyrus and Darius held to it firmly, and even under their successors, though it was in much corrupted, it was still preserved in Songs (Gâthâs) and Traditions. There can be no reasonable doubt that it largely affected the subsequent faith of the Hebrews ;\*—not indeed teaching them any truth they had not been taught before, but constraining them to recognize truths in their Scriptures which hitherto they had not seen : and therefore we must try to acquire some conception of the Persian system of doctrine and morals.

In its inception it was a revolt against the sensuous and sensual worship of the great forces of Nature into which the Hindus had degraded the primitive faith still to be recovered from the sacred Rig-Veda. It acknowledged persons,—real spiritual intelligences, in place of mere natural powers : and it drew moral distinctions between them, dividing these ruling intelligences into good and bad, pure and impure, benignant and malevolent—an immense advance on the mere admiration of whatever was

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\* I apprehend that the sojourn in Babylon did for Hebrew dogma very much what the sojourn in Egypt did for the Hebrew ritual.

strong. Nay, in some sense the Persian faith affirmed monotheism against polytheism: for it asserted that one Great Intelligence ruled over all other intelligences, and through them over the universe. This Supreme Intelligence, which the Persians called Ahura-mazda (Ormazd), is the true Creator, Preserver, Governor of all spirits, all men, all worlds. He is "good," "holy," "pure," "true;" "the Father of all truth," "the best Being of all," "the Master of purity," "the Source and Fountain of all good." On the righteous he bestows "the good mind" and everlasting happiness; while he punishes and afflicts the evil. The worshippers of this supreme spiritual Intelligence were to the last degree intolerant of idolatry. They suffered no image to profane their temples: their earliest symbol of Deity is almost as pure and abstract as a mathematical sign,—a circle with wings; the circle to denote the eternity of God, the wings His omnipresence. Under this supreme Lord, "the God of Heaven," they admitted inferior beings, angels and archangels, whose names mark them out as personified Divine attributes, or as faithful servants who administer some province of the Divine government.

To win the favour of the God of Heaven it was requisite to cultivate the virtues of truthfulness, purity, industry, and a pious sense of the Divine presence: and these virtues must spring from the heart, and cover thought as well as word and deed. His worship consisted in the

frequent offering of prayers, praises, and thanksgivings; in the reiteration of certain sacred hymns; in the occasional sacrifice of animals which, after being presented before Ormazd, furnished forth a feast for priest and worshipper: and in the performance of a mystic ceremony (the Soma), the gist of which seems to have been a grateful acknowledgment that the fruits of the earth, typified by the intoxicating juice of the Homa plant, were to be received as the gift of Heaven. A sentence or two from one of the Hymns,\* of which we have many in the Gâthâs of the Zendavesta, will show better than many words to how high a pitch divine worship was carried among the Persians: "We worship Thee, Ahura-mazda, the pure, the master of purity. We praise all good thoughts, all good words, all good deeds which are or shall be: and we likewise keep clean and pure all that is good. O Ahura-mazda, thou true happy Being! We strive to think, to speak, and to do only such things as may be best fitted to promote the two lives" (i.e. the life of the body and the life of the soul).

In this course of well-doing the faithful were animated and confirmed by a devout belief in the immortality of the soul and a conscious future existence. They were taught that at death the souls of men, both good and bad, tra-

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\* I take the quotation from Rawlinson, who gives as his authority Haug's *Essays*, pp. 162-3. Of course, there are many sentences in the Gâthâs not so admirable as those cited above.



velled along an appointed path to a narrow bridge which led to Paradise: over this bridge only pious souls could pass, the wicked souls falling from it into an awful gulf in which they received the due reward of their deeds. The happy souls of the good were helped across the long narrow arch by an angel, and as they entered Paradise a great archangel rose from his throne to greet each of them with the words, "How happy art thou who hast come here to us from the mortality to the immortality!"

This wonderfully pure creed was, however, in process of time corrupted in many ways. First of all, "the sad antithesis of human life," the conflict between light and darkness, good and evil,—the standing puzzle of the world—led the votaries of Ormazd to *dualism*. Ormazd loved and created only the good. The evil in man and in the world must be the work of an enemy. This enemy, Ahriman (Angrô-mainyus), has been seeking from eternity to undo, to mar and blast, the fair work of the God of Heaven. He is the baleful author of all evil, and under him are spirits as malignant as himself. Between these good and evil powers there is incessant conflict, a conflict which extends to every soul and every world. It will never cease until the great Deliverer arise—and even of *Him* the Persians seem to have had some dim conception—who shall overmaster and destroy evil at its source, all things then rounding to their final goal of good.

Another corrupting influence had its origin in a too



literal interpretation of the Names given to the Divine Being by the founders of the faith. Ormazd, for example, had been described as "true, *lucid, shining*, the originator of all the best things, of the spirit in nature and of the growth in nature, *of the luminaries and of the self-shining brightness which is in the luminaries.*" From these epithets and ascriptions there sprang in later days the worship of the Sun, then of the fire, as a type of God—a worship still maintained by the disciples of Zoroaster, the Ghebers and the Parsees. And from this point onward the old sad story repeats itself; once more we have to trace a pure and lofty primitive faith through the grades to which it declines on the low base level of a sensuous idolatry. The Magians, always the bitter enemies of Zoroastrianism, held that the four elements, fire, air, earth, and water were the only proper objects of human reverence. It was not difficult for them to persuade those who already worshipped fire, and were beginning to forget of Whom fire was the symbol, to include in their homage water and earth and air. Divination, incantations, the interpretation of dreams and omens soon followed, with all the dark shadows which science and religion cast behind them. And then came the lowest deep of all, that worship of the gods by sensual indulgences to which idolatry seems inevitably to gravitate.

Nevertheless we must remember that even at their worst the Persians preserved the sacred records of their

earlier faith, and that their best men always refused to accept the base additions to it which the Magians proposed. Corrupt as in many respects many of them became, the conquest of Babylon was the death-blow to the sensual idol-worship which had reigned for twenty centuries on the vast Chaldean plains: it never wholly recovered from it, though it survived for a time. From that date it declined to its fall: "Bel bowed down; Nebo stooped;\* Merodach was broken in pieces."† As I have said, the noblest monarchs of Persia were true disciples of the primitive creed of their race. And, beyond a doubt, it was similarity of creed which won their favour for the Hebrew Captives. Cyrus, in the decree‡ that enfranchised them, expressly identifies Ormazd, the God of Heaven, with Jehovah, the God of Israel; he says: "*The Lord God of Heaven* hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He hath charged me to build *Him* a house at Jerusalem. Who is there among you of all His people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem and build the house of *the Lord God of Israel*—He is *the God*."§ Nor was this

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\* Isaiah xli. 1.

† Jeremiah 1. 2.

‡ Ezra i. 2, 3.

§ Darius also identifies Jehovah with Ormazd in the remarkable decree with which he silenced the unscrupulous opposition of the Samaritans, declaring that it was for the advantage of the Persian Empire that "the house of God" should be rebuilt in Jerusalem, since in that temple "sacrifices of sweet savours" would be offered to "*the God of Heaven*," and prayers be uttered "for the life of the king and of his sons."—(Ezra vi. 10.)

belief in one God, whose temple was to be defiled by no image of Himself, the only point in common between the better Persians, such as Cyrus and Darius, and the better Jews. There were many such points. Both believed in an evil spirit tempting and accusing men ; in myriads of angels, all the host of heaven, who formed the armies of God and did His pleasure ; in a tree of life, and a tree of knowledge, and a serpent the enemy of man : both shared an iconoclastic hatred of idols and graven images, the hope of a coming Deliverer from evil, the belief in an immortal life beyond the grave and a happy Paradise in which all righteous souls would find their home and see their Father's face. These common faiths and hopes would all be points of sympathy and attachment between the two races : and it is to this agreement in religious doctrine and practice that we must ascribe the striking fact,—that the Persians, ordinarily the most intolerant of men, never persecuted the Jews ; and that the Jews, ordinarily so impatient of foreign domination, never made a single attempt to cast off the Persian yoke, nay, stood by the declining empire when the Greeks were thundering at its gates.

On one question all competent historians and commentators are agreed : viz., that the Jews gained immensely in the clearness and compass of their religious faith during the Captivity. The Captivity which was the punishment was also the limit of their idolatry : into that sin they never afterwards fell. Now first, too, they began to

understand that the bond of their unity was not local, not national even, but spiritual and religious: they were spread over every province of a foreign empire, yet they were one people and a sacred people in virtue of their common service of Jehovah and their common hope of Messiah's coming. This hope had been vaguely felt before, and just previous to the Captivity Isaiah had arrayed it in an unrivalled splendour of imagery: now it sunk into the popular mind and became a deep longing of the national heart. From this period, moreover, the immortality of the soul and the life beyond death entered distinctly and prominently into the Hebrew Creed. Always latent in their Scriptures, these truths disclosed themselves to the Jews as they came in contact with the Persian doctrines of judgment and future rewards. Hitherto they had thought mainly, if not exclusively, of the temporal rewards and punishments by which the Mosaic Law encouraged the good and threatened the wicked: henceforth they saw that in time and on earth human actions are not carried to their final and due results; they looked forward to a judgment in which all wrongs should be righted, all unpunished evils receive their recompense, and all the sufferings of the good be exchanged for endless joy and peace.

Now this, as we shall see, is the very moral of the Book Ecclesiastes, the triumphant climax to which it mounts. The endeavour of Coheleth is to show how evil and good

blended in the human lot, evil so largely preponderating in the lot of many of the good as to make life a curse unless it were sustained by hope ; to give hope by assuring the Hebrew Captives that "God takes cognisance of all things" and "will bring every work to judgment," good or bad ; and to urge on them, as the conclusion of his Quest of Good and as the whole duty of man, to prepare themselves for that Divine Judgment by fearing God and keeping His commandments. This was the light he was commissioned to carry into their great darkness ; and if the lamp and the oil were of God, it is hardly too much to say that the spark which kindled the lamp was taken from the Persian fire, since that also was of God. Or, to vary the figure and to make it more accurate, we may say, that the truths of the future life lay hidden in the Hebrew Scriptures, and that it was by the light of the Persian doctrine of the future that the Jews discovered them in the Word. It is thus indeed that God has taught men in all ages. The Word remains ever the same, but our circumstances change, our mental posture varies, and with our posture the angle at which the light of Heaven falls on the sacred page : we are brought into contact with new races, new ideas, new discoveries of science, and the familiar Word forthwith teems with new meanings, with new adaptations to our needs : truths unseen before, though they were always there, come to sight, deep truths rise to the surface, mysterious truths grow simple and plain, truths that jangled

on the ear melt into harmony; and we are wrapt in wonder and admiration as we afresh discover the Bible to be the Book for all races and for all ages, an inexhaustible fountain of truth and comfort and grace.

TRANSLATION.





# Ecclesiastes ; or, the Preacher.

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## THE PROLOGUE:

*In which the Problem of the Book is indirectly stated.*

*Chap. I., vv. 1 to 11.*

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THE WORDS OF THE PREACHER, SON OF DAVID, KING IN JERUSALEM.

VANITY of vanities, saith the Preacher ; 2

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,

Since man hath no profit from all his labour 3

Which he laboureth under the sun !

For one generation passeth, and another generation cometh ; 4

While the earth abideth for ever.

---

VERSE I. *The Preacher.* The Son of David, whose "words" are recorded in this Book, is called in the Hebrew *Cohелеth*. *Cohēleth* does not mean "the Preacher," but "the Assembler," or "the Gatherer." The title is descriptive of the author's object. It probably signifies that just as Solomon *gathered* the Hebrew people into the Temple for the worship of Jehovah (1 Kings viii.), so the author's endeavour will be to gather back into the holy fellowship those who, perplexed and saddened by the inscrutable moral problems of the time, were in danger of renouncing the God and the worship of their fathers. This, however, is a main object with every preacher; and therefore we may retain the rendering of the word *Cohēleth* which long use has made familiar and expressive. Probably "the Preacher" is a title which for us carries more weight with it, more even of the true meaning of the Hebrew, than either "the Gatherer" or "the Assembler" would carry.

The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down ; 5  
And though it panteth towards its place, it riseth there again.  
The wind goeth toward the south, and veereth to the north ; 6  
It whirleth round and round,  
Yet the wind returneth on its course.  
All the streams run into the sea, yet the sea doth not overflow : 7  
To the place whence the streams came, thither they return again.  
All words are vain. Man cannot utter it. 8  
The eye can never be satisfied with seeing,  
Nor could the ear ever hear all.  
What hath been, still is ; 9  
And that which hath been done, is done still :  
And there is no new thing under the sun.  
If there be anything of which it is said, ' Behold, this is new ! ' 10  
It hath been long ago, in the time which was before us.  
But there is no remembrance of those who have been ; 11  
Nor will there be any remembrance of men who are to come  
Among those that will live after them.

---

Vv. 4—7. The Persian Magi worshipped the elements of fire, air, earth, and water as the only proper objects of human reverence (Herodotus i. 132 ; Strabo xv. 3, 13). In these verses therefore there may be, besides their obvious meaning, a latent reference to the objects of the Magian worship.

## FIRST SECTION.

*The Quest of the Chief Good in Wisdom and in Pleasure.*

*Chap. I. v. 12, to Chap. II. v. 26.*



THE PREACHER, was king over Israel, in Jerusalem. 12 *The Quest in Wisdom.*

And I gave my heart to search diligently into the wisdom 13

Of all that is done under heaven :

Chap. I.,  
vv. 12—18.

This sore task hath God given to the children of men,

To busy themselves therewith.

I considered all the works that are done under the sun ; 14

And, behold, they are all vanity and vexation of spirit :

For that which is crooked cannot be set straight, 15

And he that is gone cannot be numbered again !

I therefore spake to my heart, saying, 16

‘ I, lo, I have acquired greater wisdom

Than all who were before me in Jerusalem,’—

---

VERSE 14. *Vexation of spirit.* Literally, “Striving after the wind.” But the time-honoured phrase “vexation of spirit” sufficiently expresses the Writer’s meaning. It seems better therefore to retain it than to introduce the Hebrew metaphor which, though it be very expressive, has a somewhat novel and foreign sound.

My heart having seen much wisdom and knowledge ;  
 For I had given my heart to find knowledge and wisdom. 17  
 I perceive that even this is vexation of spirit :  
 For in much wisdom is much sadness, 18  
 And to multiply knowledge is to multiply sorrow.

*The Quest in  
Pleasure.*

Chap. II.,  
vv. 1-11.

THEN I said to my heart : II. 1  
 ‘Come, now, let me try thee with mirth,  
 And thou shalt see pleasure :’  
 And, lo, this too is vanity !  
 To mirth I said, ‘Thou art mad !’ 2  
 And to pleasure, ‘What canst thou do ?’  
 I thought in my heart to allure my body with pleasure, 3

VERSE 17. *To find knowledge and wisdom.* The Authorized Version renders, “to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly.” The latter clause violates both the sense and the grammatical construction. The word translated “to know” is not an infinitive, but a noun; and should be rendered “knowledge:” the word translated “folly” means “prudence,” and the word translated “madness” hardly means more than “folly.” Moreover, the text seems to be corrupt. The sense of the passage is against it, I think, as it now stands: for the design of Coheleth is simply to show the insufficiency of wisdom and knowledge, not to prove folly foolish. On the whole therefore it seems better to follow the high authority which arranges the text as I have rendered it. The Hebraist will find the question discussed in Ginsburg.

CHAP. II. Verse 2. *What canst thou do ?* The Hebrew idiom is, “What can *she* do?”

VERSE 3. *The brief day of their life.* Literally, “the numbered days of their life,” that is, easily numbered, few, brief.

My mind guiding it wisely,  
And to lay hold on folly,  
Till I should see what it is good for the sons of men to do under  
heaven,  
Through the brief day of their life.  
I multiplied my possessions therefore ; 4  
I builded me houses, I planted me vineyards ;  
I made me gardens and pleasure-grounds, 5  
And I planted in them trees of all sorts of fruit ;  
I made me tanks of water, 6  
From which to water the groves :  
I bought me menservants and maidservants, and had homeborn  
servants : 7  
I had also many herds of oxen and sheep,  
More indeed than all who were before me in Jerusalem :  
I heaped up silver and gold, 8  
And the treasures of kings and of the kingdoms :  
I got me men-singers and women-singers ;  
And the amorous delights of men with many concubines :

---

VERSE 6. *The groves.* Literally, "the groves shooting up trees."

VERSE 8. *And the amorous delights, &c.* Literally, "the delights of men, a large number of concubines;" but the word for "delights" means "amorous delights," and no doubt these were taken "with" the concubines.

So that I surpassed all that were before me in Jerusalem, 9  
     My wisdom helping me;  
 And nothing that my eyes desired did I withhold from them; 10  
     I did not keep back my heart from any pleasure;  
 Since my heart was to receive happiness from all my toil,  
     And this was to be my portion from all my toil.  
 But when I turned to look on all the works which my hands had  
     wrought, 11  
 And at the labour which it cost me to accomplish them,  
     Behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit;  
     For there is no profit under the sun !

*Wisdom and  
 Pleasure Com-  
 pared.*

Chap. II., vv.  
 12—23.

THEN I turned to compare wisdom with madness and folly,— 12  
     And what is the man that will come after the king  
     Whom they made king long ago ?—  
 And I saw that wisdom excelleth folly 13  
     As far as light excelleth darkness :  
 The wise man, his eyes are in his head, 14  
     While the fool walketh blindly.  
 Nevertheless I knew that the same fate will befall both.  
     Therefore I spake with my heart : 15  
 ‘ A fate like that of the fool will also befall me, even me;  
     Why then am I wiser ? ’

And I said to my heart :

‘ This too is vanity,

Since there is no remembrance of the wise man nor of the fool ; 16

For both will be forgotten

As in time past so also in days to come :

And, alas, the wise man dieth like the fool ! ’

Therefore I hated life, for a sore burden was upon me, 17

Even the labour which I wrought under the sun ;

Since all is vanity and vexation of spirit :

Yea, I hated all the gain which I had gained under the sun, 18

Because I must leave it to the man who shall come after me,

And who can tell whether he will be a wise man or a fool ? 19

Yet shall he have power over all my gain

Which I have wisely gained under the sun :

This too is vanity.

Then I turned to cause my heart to despair 20

Of all the gain which I gained under the sun :

For here is a man who hath laboured wisely and prudently and  
dexterously, 21

And he must leave it as a portion to a man who hath not laboured  
therein ;

This also is vanity and a great evil :

For man hath nothing of all his heavy labour 22

And the vexation of his heart under the sun,  
 Since his task grieveth and vexeth him all his days, 23  
 And even at night his heart hath no rest :  
 This too is vanity.

*The Conclusion.*

Chap. II., vv.  
 24—26.

THERE is nothing better for man than to eat and to drink, 24  
 And to let his soul take pleasure in his labour—  
 But even this, I saw, cometh from God—  
 For who should eat, 25  
 And who should hasten thereunto more than he ?  
 For to the man who is good before Him, 26  
 He giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy ;  
 But to the sinner He giveth the task to gather and to heap up,  
 And to give it to him who is good before God :  
 This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

---

VERSE 25. *More than he ?* The Hebrew is “more than I ?” The sense is,—Who has a clearer right to enjoy the fruit of his toil than he who has wrought at it ? And to express the thought more vividly, Cobelet, adopting a common Hebrew idiom, throws himself into the labourer’s place, speaks in his person : says “more than I” instead of “more than *he*.” But to retain this idiom in our English Version would be to confuse the meaning of the verse rather than to make it more clear.



## SECOND SECTION.

*The Quest of the Chief Good in Devotion to the Affairs of Business.*

*Chap. III. v. 1, to Chap. V. v. 20.*



HERE is a season for all things,

And an appointed time for every undertaking under  
heaven :

A time to be born, and a time to die ;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up plants ;

A time to kill, and a time to save ;

A time to pull down houses, and a time to build them up ;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh ;

A time to mourn, and a time to rejoice ;

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather up stones ;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing ;

A time to seek, and a time to lose ;

A time to keep, and a time to throw away ;

A time to rend garments, and a time to sew them together ;

A time to be silent, and a time to speak ;

III. 1 *The Quest  
obstructed by  
Divine Ordina-  
nces ;*

2 *Chap. III., vv.  
1—15.*

3

4

5

6

7

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A time to love, and a time to hate ;	8
A time of war, and a time of peace :	
He who laboureth hath therefore no profit from his labours.	9
I have considered the task which God hath given to the sons of men,	10
To busy themselves withal :	
He hath made it all beautiful in its season ;	11
He hath also put eternity into their heart ;	
Only they understand not the work of God from beginning to end.	
I found that there was no good for them but to rejoice	12
And to do themselves good all their life ;	
And also that if a man eat and drink	13
And take pleasure in all his labour,	
It is a gift of God.	
I found too that whatever God hath ordained continueth for ever ;	14

---

CHAP. III. Verse 11. *Only they understand not*, &c. Literally, "only man understandeth not the work which God hath made"—*man* being collective here, a noun of multitude, and equivalent to "the sons of men" of the previous verse.

VERSE 12. *I found*, &c. Literally, "I know." But the verb is used in the sense of "I came to know," I discovered, I found out. The same verb is used in the opening clause of verse 14.

Nothing can be added to it,  
And nothing can be taken from it :  
And God hath so ordered it that men may fear before Him.  
That which hath been was long ago, 15  
And that which is to be was long ago ;  
For God recalleth the past.

MOREOVER, I saw under the sun, 16 *And by Human  
Injustice and  
Perversity.*  
That there was iniquity in the place of justice,  
And in the place of equity there was iniquity.  
I said to mine heart : 17 *Chap. III.,  
v. 16, to Chap.  
IV., v. 3.*  
‘ God will judge the righteous and the wicked,  
For there is a time for everything and for every deed with Him.’  
Yet I said to my heart of the children of men : 18  
‘ God hath chosen them  
To show that they, even they, are as beasts.  
For a mere chance is man, and the beast a mere chance, 19  
And they are both subject to the same chance ;  
As is the death of the one so is the death of the other ;  
And both have the same spirit :  
And the man hath no advantage over the beast,  
For both are vanity :  
Both go to the same place ; 20

Both sprang from dust, and both turn into dust :  
And who knoweth whether the spirit of man goeth upward, 21  
Or the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth ?'  
Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better for man 22  
Than to rejoice in his labours ;  
For this is his portion :  
And who shall give him to see what will be after him ?  
Then I turned and saw IV. 1  
All the oppressed who are suffering under the sun :  
I beheld the tears of the oppressed,  
And they had no comforter ;  
And their oppressors were violent,  
Yet had they no comforter :  
And I accounted the dead who died long ago 2  
Happier than the living who are still alive ;  
While happier than either is he who hath not been born, 3  
Who hath not seen the evil doings which are done under the  
sun.

---

VERSE 21. The question is here, as so often in Hebrew, the strongest form of negation. As in v. 19 the Preacher affirms of man and beast that "both have the same spirit," and in v. 20, that "both go to the same place," so, in this verse, he emphatically denies that there is any difference in their destination at death.

THEN too I saw that all this toil,	4	<i>It is rendered hopeless by the base Origin of Human Industries.</i>
And all this dexterity in toil,		
Spring from the jealous rivalry of one with the other :		Chap. IV., vv. 4—8.
This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.		
The sluggard foldeth his hands ;	5	
Yet he eateth his meat :		
Better a handful of quiet	6	
Than two handfuls of labour with vexation of spirit.		
And again I turned and saw a vanity under the sun :	7	
Here is a man who hath no one with him,	8	
Not even a son or a brother ;		
And yet there is no end to all his labour,		
Neither are his eyes satisfied with riches :		
For whom then doth he labour and deny his soul any of his wealth ?		
This too is vanity and an evil work.		
TWO are better than one,	9	<i>Yet these are capable of a nobler Motive and Mode.</i>
Because they have a good reward for their labour :		Chap. IV., vv. 9—16.

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CHAP. IV. Verse 8. *For whom doth he, &c.* Literally, “for whom do I labour and deny myself any of my wealth?” As in Chap. II. v. 25, Coheleth suddenly assumes the labourer’s place, so here, and for the same reason, he assumes that of the lonely miser.

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For if one fall, the other will lift up his fellow ;	10
But woe to the lonely one who falleth	
And hath no fellow to help him up !	
Moreover, if two sleep together, they are warm ;	11
But he that is alone, how can he be warm ?	
And if an enemy overpower the one, two will withstand him.	12
And a threefold cord is not easily broken.	
Happier is a poor and wise youth	13
Than an old and foolish king	
Who even yet has not learned to be admonished :	
For a prisoner may go from a prison to a throne,	14
Whilst a king may become a beggar in his own kingdom.	
I see all the living who walk under the sun	15
Flocking to the sociable youth who standeth up in his place ;	
There is no end to the multitude of the people over whom he	
ruleth :	16
Nevertheless those who live after him will not rejoice in him ;	
For even this is vanity and vexation of spirit.	

---

VERSE 12. *The one* : i.e. "the lonely one" of the previous verse.

VERSE 15. *Flocking to the sociable youth*. Literally, "*with the sociable youth*:" i.e. *with him* in the sense of coming to his help, joining his faction in the State.

KEEP thy foot when thou goest to the House of God ;	v. 1	<i>So also a nobler and happier Mode of Wor- ship is open to men :</i>
For it is better to obey than to offer the sacrifices of the disobedient,		
Since they who obey cannot do evil.		Chap. V.,
Do not hurry on thy mouth,	2	vv. 1—7.
And do not urge thy heart to utter words before God ;		
For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth :		
Therefore let thy words be few.		
Moreover a dream cometh through the multitude of affairs,	3	
And foolish talk through the multitude of words.		
When thou vowest a vow unto God,	4	
Do not hesitate to pay it :		
For fools have no steadfast will.		
Pay that which thou hast vowed.		
Better that thou shouldest not vow	5	
Than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.		
Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin,	6	

CHAP. V. Verse 1. *It is better.* Literally, "It is nearer:" that is to say, To keep in the path of obedience is a nearer way of coming to God, brings us more speedily and happily into His presence, than the roundabout and dubious path of sinning and then bringing sin-offerings. *Cannot do evil.* Literally, "Know not to do evil."

VERSE 6. *Before the Angel.* That is, before the Angel who, to the Hebrew thought, presided over the altar of worship, and who was present even when only two or three met for the study of the Law: to study the Law being in some sort an act of worship.



And say not before the Angel, ' It was an error :'  
 For why should God be angry at thine idle talk  
 And destroy the work of thy hands ?  
 For all this is through the multitude of idle thoughts and 7  
 vanities and much talking :  
 But fear thou God.

*And a more  
 helpful and  
 consolatory  
 Trust in the  
 Divine  
 Providence.*

Chap. V.,  
 vv. 8—17.

IF THOU seest oppression of the poor, 8  
 And the perversion of justice and equity in the land,  
 Be not dismayed at it ;  
 For superior watcheth superior,  
 And superiors again watch over them :  
 And the advantage for the people is, that it extendeth to all, 9  
 For even the king is a servant to the field.  
 He that loveth silver is never satisfied with silver, 10  
 Nor he that loveth riches with what they yield ;  
 This too is vanity.  
 For when riches increase they increase that consume them : 11

---

VERSE 7. *All this.* Literally, " It is." That is to say, All the evils which Cobeletb has just deprecated—irreverent prayers, unatoning sacrifices, rash vows, and the punishment these provoke—spring from the multitude of idle thoughts and words.

What advantage then hath the owner thereof  
Save the looking thereupon with his eyes ?  
The sleep of the husbandman is sweet 12  
Whether he eat little or much ;  
While abundance suffereth not the rich to sleep.  
There is a great evil which I have seen under the sun— 13  
Riches have been hoarded up by the rich  
To the hurt of the next owner thereof :  
For the riches perish in an unlucky enterprise, 14  
And he begetteth a son when he hath nothing in his hand :  
As he cometh forth from the womb of his mother, 15  
Even as he cometh naked,  
So also he returneth again,  
And taketh nothing from his labour  
Which he may carry away in his hand.  
This also is a great evil, 16  
That just as he cometh so he must go :  
And what advantage hath he who laboureth for the wind ?  
Yet all his days he eateth in darkness, 17  
And is much perturbed and hath vexation and grief.

---

VERSE 11. *An unlucky enterprise.* Literally, "an employment of evil : " i.e. a project with evil or unfortunate results.

*The Conclusion.*

BEHOLD, that which I have said holds good,— 18

Chap. V.,  
vv. 18—20.

That it is well for man to eat and to drink  
And to enjoy the good of all his labours which he laboureth  
under the sun,  
Through the brief day of his life which God hath given him :

For this is his portion.

And I have also said, 19

That a man to whom God hath given riches and wealth,  
If He hath also enabled him to eat thereof  
And to take his portion and to rejoice in his labour ;—  
This is a gift of God :

He should remember that the days of his life are not many, 20  
And that God meant him to work for the enjoyment of his  
heart.

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VERSE 18. *That which I have said.* Literally, “that which I have *seen* ;” but the meaning is, “that which I asserted before—that which I have *seen* and have *said* that I had seen.”

### THIRD SECTION.

*The Quest in Wealth and in the Golden Mean.*

*Chaps. VI., VII. and VIII. vv. 1 to 15.*



HERE is another evil which I have seen under the  
sun,

And it weigheth heavily upon men :

Here is a man to whom God hath given riches and wealth and  
abundance,

So that his soul lacketh nothing of all that it desireth ;

And God hath not given him the power of enjoying it,

But a stranger enjoyeth it :

This is vanity and a great evil.

Though one beget a hundred children

And live many years,

Yea, many as may be the days of his years,

Yet if his soul is not satisfied with good ;

*The Quest in  
Wealth.*

VI. 1 He who makes  
Riches his  
Chief Good is  
haunted by  
Fears and  
2 Perplexities :

Chap. VI.,  
vv. 1—6.

3

Even though the grave did not wait for him,  
 Yet better is an abortion than he :  
 For this cometh in nothingness and goeth in darkness,      4  
 And its memory is covered with darkness ;  
 It doth not even see, and doth not know the sun :      5  
 It hath more rest than he.  
 And if he live a thousand years and see no good :—      6  
 Do not both go to the same place ?  
 All the labour of this man is for his mouth ;      7  
 Therefore the soul cannot be satisfied :  
 For what advantage hath the wise man over the fool,      8  
 Or what the poor man over the magnate ?  
 It is better indeed to enjoy the good we have      9  
 Than to crave a good beyond our reach :  
 Yet even this is vanity and vexation of spirit.  
 That which hath been was long since ordained ;      10  
 And it is very certain that even the greatest is but a man,

VERSE 3. *Yet better.* Literally, “*I say better.*”

VERSE 4. *For this ; viz.* “the abortion” of the previous verse.

VERSE 8. *The magnate.* Literally, “he who knoweth to walk before the living ;” a man of eminent station who is much in the eye of the public.

VERSE 9. *To enjoy the good we have, &c.* Literally, “Better is that which is seen by the eyes (the present good) than that which is pursued by the soul (the distant and uncertain good).”

*For God has  
put Eternity  
into his Heart ;*

Chap. VI.,  
vv. 7—10.

And cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he.

Moreover there are many things which increase vanity : 11

What advantage then hath man ?

And who knoweth what is good for man in life, 12

The brief day of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow ?

And who can tell man what shall be after him under the sun ?

A GOOD NAME is better than sweet perfume, VII. 1

And the day of death better than the day of one's birth :

It is better to go the house of mourning 2

Than to the house of feasting,

Because this is the end of all men,

And the living should lay it to heart :

Better is serious thought than wanton mirth, 3

For by a sad countenance the heart is bettered :

The heart of the wise therefore is in the house of mourning, 4

But in the house of mirth is the heart of fools.

It is better for a man to listen to the reproof of the wise 5

Than to listen to the song of fools ;

*And much that  
he gains only  
feeds Vanity ;  
Chap. VI.,  
v. 11.*

*Nor can he tell  
what will  
become of his  
Gains.  
Chap. VI.,  
v. 12.*

*The Quest in  
the Golden  
Mean.*

*The Method  
of the Man  
who pursues it.  
Chap. VII.,  
vv. 1—14.*

VERSE 12. *The brief day.* Literally, "the numbered days," i.e. easily numbered, few.

CHAP. VII. Verse 2. *Because this is the end :* i.e., the death bewailed in the house of mourning.

VERSE 3. *The heart is bettered ;* or, perhaps, "the heart is made good."

For the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under  
a pot : 6

This also is vanity.

Wrong-doing maketh the wise man foolish, 7

And corrupteth a gentle heart.

The end of a reproof is better than its beginning, 8

And patience is better than pride :

Therefore hurry not on thy spirit to be angry ; 9

For anger is nursed in the bosom of fools.

Do not say, ‘ How was it that former days were better than  
these ? ’ 10

For that is not the part of wisdom.

Wisdom is as good as wealth, 11

And even hath an advantage over it for those who lead an active  
life :

For to be under the shelter of wisdom 12

Is to be under the shelter of wealth ;

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VERSE 11 *Those who lead an active life.* Literally, “ those who see the sun ; ” *i.e.* those who are much in the sun, who lead a busy active life, are much occupied with traffic or public affairs.

VERSE 12. *Fortifieth the heart : i.e.* keeps the heart tranquil and serene under all chances and changes.



And the advantage of wisdom is,  
 That it fortifieth the heart of the possessor thereof.  
 Consider moreover the work of God : 13  
 Since no man can straighten that which He hath made crooked.  
 In the day of prosperity be thou content ; 14  
 And in the day of adversity,  
 Remember that God hath made this as well as that,  
 In order that man should not be able to foresee that which is to  
 come.

IN MY fleeting days I have seen	15	<i>The Perils to which it exposes him.</i>
Both the righteous die in his righteousness,		
And the wicked live long in his wickedness :		(1) He is likely to compromise
Be not very righteous therefore ;	16	Conscience ;
Nor make thyself too wise lest thou be forsaken :		Chap. VII., vv. 15—20.
Be not very wicked, nor yet very foolish,	17	
Lest thou die before thy time :		
It is better that thou shouldest lay hold of this,	18	

VERSE 14. *This as well as that* : i.e. adversity as well as prosperity. God sends both that, not foreseeing what may come to pass, we may live in a constant and humble dependence on Him.

VERSE 18. *This . . . and that*. *This* refers to the folly and wickedness of verse 17 ; and *that* to the wisdom and righteousness of verse 16. *Take hold on both*. Literally, "go along with both."

	And also not let go of that ;	
	For whoso feareth God will take hold on both.	
	This wisdom alone is greater strength to the wise	19
	Than an army to a beleaguered city ;	
	For there is not a righteous man on earth	20
	Who doeth good and sinneth not.	
	Moreover seek not to know all that is said of thee,	21
	Lest thou hear thy servant speak evil of thee :	
	For thou knowest in thine heart	22
	That thou also hast many times spoken evil of others.	
	All this wisdom have I tried.	23
	I desired a higher wisdom, but it was far from me :	
	That which was far off remaineth far off,	24
	And deep remaineth deep :	
	Who can find it out ?	
	Then I and my heart turned to know this wisdom	25
	And diligently examine it—	

---

VERSE 19. *This wisdom* : viz. the moderate common-sense view of life which has been described. *Than an army*, &c. Literally, "than many mighty men who have been in the city."

VERSE 21. *Seek not to know*, &c. Literally, "Give not thy heart to all words that are uttered."

To discover the cause of wickedness, vice,		(3) To despise
And that folly which is madness ;		Women ;
And I found woman more bitter than death :	26	Chap. VII., vv. 25—29.
She is a net ;		
Her heart is a snare, and her hands are chains :		
Whoso is good before God shall escape her,		
But the sinner shall be taken by her.		
Behold what I have found, saith the Preacher—	27	
Taking things one by one to reach the result—		
And what my soul is still seeking and I have not found :		
I have found one man among a thousand,	28	
But in all that number a woman have I not found :		
Lo, this only have I found,	29	
That God made man upright,		
But that they seek out many devices.		
Who is like the wise man ?	VIII. 1	(4) And to be
And who like him that understandeth the interpretation of this		indifferent to
matter ?		Public Wrongs.
The wisdom of this man maketh his face bright		Chap. VIII., vv. 1—13.
And his sad countenance is changed.		

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CHAP. VIII. verse 1. *This matter.* Literally, “the thing,” *i.e.* the thing or matter here in question: *viz.* this practical prudent view of human life.

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I say then, Obey the King's commandment,	2
And the rather because of the oath of fealty :	
Do not throw off thine allegiance,	3
Nor resent an evil word,	
For he can do whatsoever he please :	
For the word of a king is mighty ;	4
And who shall say to him, ' What doest thou ? '	
Whoso keepeth his commandment will not know an evil word.	5
Moreover the heart of the wise man foreseeth a time of retri- bution—	
For there is a time of retribution for all things—	6
When the tyranny of man is heavy upon him :	
Because he knoweth not what will be,	7
And because no one can tell him when it will be.	
No man is ruler over his own spirit,	8

---

VERSE 2. *The oath of fealty.* Literally, "the oath by God." The Babylonian and Persian despots exacted an oath of loyalty from conquered races. Each had to swear by the god he worshipped.

VERSE 3. *Do not throw off, &c.* Literally, "Do not hurry from his presence or even stand up because of an evil word." To stand up in the divan of an eastern despot is a sign of resentment; to rush from it, a sign of disloyalty and rebellion.

VERSE 7. *Because he knoweth not : i.e.* the tyrant does not know. The sense seems to be: Retribution is all the more certain because, in his infatuation, the despot does not foresee the disastrous results of his tyranny, and because no one can tell him when or how they will disclose themselves.

To retain the spirit,  
Nor has he any power over the day of his death ;  
And there is no furlough in this battle,  
And no craft will save the wicked.  
All this have I seen, 9  
Having given my heart to all that is done under the sun.  
But there is a time when a man ruleth over men to their hurt. 10  
Thus I have seen wicked men buried  
And come again,  
And those who did right depart from the place of the holy  
And be forgotten in the city :  
This also is vanity.  
Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed forthwith, 11  
The heart of the sons of men is set in them to do evil—  
Because a sinner doeth evil a hundred years,  
And hath a son to perpetuate his evil.

---

VERSE 9. *All this have I seen* : i.e. all this retribution on tyrants and the consequent deliverance of the oppressed.

VERSE 10. But the Preacher has also seen times when retributive justice did *not* overtake the oppressors, when they *came again* in the person of children as wicked and tyrannical as themselves.

VERSE 11. *And hath a son to perpetuate his evil*. Literally, "And there is a perpetuator to him."

But I know that it shall be well with those who fear God, 12

Who truly fear before Him :

And it shall not be well with the wicked, 13

But, like a shadow, he shall not prolong his days,

Because he doth not fear before God.

*Therefore the  
Preacher con-  
demns this  
View of  
Human Life.*

NEVERTHELESS this vanity doth happen on the earth, 14

That there are righteous men who have a wage like that of the  
wicked,

*Chap. VIII.,  
vv. 14—15.*

And there are wicked men who have a wage like that of the  
righteous :

This too, I said, is vanity.

And I commended mirth, 15

Because there is nothing better for man under the sun

Than to eat and drink and rejoice ;

And this will go with him to his work

Through the days of his life,

Which God giveth him under the sun.

---

VERSE 15. *And this will go with him :* viz. this clear enjoying temper than which, as yet, the Preacher has found “ nothing better.”

## FOURTH SECTION.

*The Quest of the Chief Good Achieved.*

*Chap. VIII. v. 16, to Chap. XII. v. 7.*



AS THEN I gave my heart to acquire wisdom,      VIII. 16 *The Chief Good  
not to be found  
in Wisdom :*  
And to see the work which is done under the sun,

How that one seeth no sleep with his eyes by day or by night ;      Chap. VIII.,  
I saw that man cannot find out all the work of God      17 v. 16, to Chap.  
IX., v. 6.

Which is done under the sun ;

Though man labour to discover it,

He cannot find it out ;

And though the wise man say he understandeth it,

Nevertheless he hath not found it out.

For all this have I taken to heart and proved it,      IX. 1

That the righteous, and the wise, and their labours are in the  
hand of God :



They know not whether they shall meet love or hatred ;  
Both are before them as before all others.  
The same fate befalleth to the righteous and to the wicked,      2  
To the good and pure and to the impure,  
To him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not ;  
As is the good so is the sinner,  
And he that sweareth as he who feareth an oath.  
This is the greatest evil of all that is done under the sun,—      3  
That there is one fate for all :  
And that, although the heart of the sons of men is full of evil,  
And madness is in their hearts through life,  
Yet, after it, they go to the dead :  
For who is exempted ?      4  
To all the living there is hope,  
For a living dog is better than a dead lion ;

---

CHAP. IX. Verse 1. *They know not whether they shall meet love or hatred* may mean that the wisest and the best of men cannot tell whether they shall meet (1) the love or the enmity of God, as shown in adverse or favourable providences ; or (2) the things which they love or hate ; or (3) the love or the hatred of their fellows. Of these interpretations, I prefer the last.

VERSE 3. The words of this verse do not, as they stand, seem to carry on the logical connexion of thought. The Preacher's complaint is, that even the wise and the good are not exempted from the common fate, not that the foolish and reckless are exposed to it. The text may be corrupt : but, more probably, the true exegesis of it is still to seek. Ginsburg however is content with the passage as it is here given.

For the living know that they shall die, 5

But the dead know not anything ;

And there is no more any compensation to them,

For their memory is gone :

Their love too, no less than their hatred and zeal, hath perished ; 6

And there is no more any portion for them in aught that is done  
under the sun.

GO, THEN, eat thy bread with gladness, 7 *Nor in Plea-*  
*sure :*

And drink thy wine with a cheerful heart,

Since God hath long been pleased with thy works : *Chap. ix.,*  
*vv. 7—12.*

Let thy garments be always white ; 8

Let no perfume be lacking to thy head :

And enjoy thyself with any woman whom thou lovest 9

All the days of thy life

Which He giveth thee under the sun,

All thy fleeting days :

For this is thy portion in life,

And in the labour which thou labourest under the sun.

---

VERSE 9. *Enjoy thyself with ANY WOMAN.* The word here rendered "woman" does not mean "wife." Not only is the whole drift of the context against that meaning, but the absence of the article in the Hebrew shows that Coheleth must have meant "*a* woman" in the sense of "*any* woman."

Whatsoever thine hand findeth to do, 10  
Do it whilst thou art able ;  
For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in  
Hades,  
Whither thou goest.  
Then I turned and saw under the sun, 11  
That the race is not to the swift,  
Nor the battle to the strong ;  
Nor yet bread to the wise,  
Nor riches to the intelligent,  
Nor favour to the learned :  
But that the time of calamity cometh to all, 12  
And that man doth not even know his time ;  
Like fish taken in a fatal net,  
And like sparrows caught in a snare,  
So are the sons of men entrapped in the time of their calamity  
When it falleth suddenly upon them.

*Nor in Devotion to Public Affairs and its Rewards :*

THIS wisdom also have I seen, 13  
And it seemed great to me :—  
There was a little city 14  
And few men in it,  
And a great king came against it and besieged it,

Chap. IX.,  
v. 13, to  
Chap. X., v.  
20.

And threw up a military causeway before it :

Now there was found in it a poor wise man, 15

And he saved that city by his wisdom :

Yet no one remembered that same poor man.

Therefore say I, 16

Though wisdom is better than strength,

Yet the wisdom of the poor is despised,

And his words are not listened to :

Though the words of the wise are listened to 17

With more pleasure than the loud behests of a foolish ruler,

And wisdom is better than weapons of war,

Yet one fool destroyeth much good :

As a dead fly maketh sweet ointment to stink, x. 1

So a little folly overpowereth (much) honourable wisdom.

Nevertheless the mind of the wise man is at his right hand, 2

But the mind of the fool at his left :

For so soon as the fool setteth his foot in the street 3

He betrayeth his lack of understanding ;

Yet he saith of every one (he meeteth), ‘ He is a fool ! ’

---

CHAP. X. Verse 3. *Setteth his foot in the street.* Literally, “Walketh on the road.” The sentence seems to be a proverb used to express the extreme stupidity of the fool, who, the very moment he leaves his house, is bewildered, and cannot even find his way from one familiar spot to another.

If the anger of thy ruler be kindled against thee,	4
Resent it not ;	
For submission will prevent a graver outrage.	
There is an evil which I have seen under the sun,	5
An outrage which only a ruler can commit :	
A great fool is lifted to high places,	6
While the noble sit degraded :	
I have seen servants upon horses,	7
And masters walking like servants upon the ground.	
Yet he that diggeth a pit shall fall into it ;	8
And whoso breaketh down a wall a serpent shall bite him ;	
He who pulleth down stones shall be hurt therewith ;	9
And whoso cleaveth wood shall be cut.	
If the axe be blunt	10
And he do not sharpen it beforehand,	

---

VERSE 4. *Resent it not.* Literally, "Quit not thy place." See Note on Chap. VIII. Verse 3.

VERSE 7. To ride upon a horse is still a mark of distinction in many Eastern States. In Turkish cities, till of late, no Christian was permitted to ride any nobler beast than an ass or a mule : so neither were the Jews, during the middle ages, in any Christian city.

VERSE 10. Ginsburg renders this difficult and much-disputed passage thus : "If the axe be blunt, and he do not sharpen it beforehand, he shall only increase the army ; the advantage of repairing hath wisdom," and explains it as meaning : "If any insulted subject lift a blunt axe against the trunk of despotism, he will only make the

He must put on more strength;  
But wisdom should teach him to repair it.  
If the serpent bite because it is not charmed, 11  
There is no advantage to the charmer.  
The words of the wise man's mouth win him favour; 12  
But the lips of the fool destroy him:  
For the words of his mouth are folly and mischief 13  
From beginning to end.  
The fool also speaketh much, 14  
Though no man knoweth or can know what shall be,  
Either here or hereafter:  
And who can tell him?  
The work of a fool wearieth him, 15  
For he cannot even find his way to the city.

tyrant increase his army, and thereby augment his own sufferings: but it is the prerogative of wisdom to repair the mischief which such precipitate folly occasions." I have offered what seems a simpler explanation in the comment on this passage, and have tried to give a simpler, yet not less accurate, rendering in the text. But there are almost as many readings as critics; and it is impossible to do more than make a hesitating choice among them.

VERSE 11. *The charmer.* Literally, "The master of the tongue." The allusion of this graphic phrase is of course to the subtle cantillations by which the charmer drew, or was thought to draw, serpents from their 'lurk.' \*

VERSE 15. *He cannot even find his way to the city:* a proverbial saying. It denotes that the fool has not wit enough even to keep a high road, to walk in the beaten paths which lead to a capital city.

Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is childish, 16  
 And thy princes feast in the morning!  
 Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is noble, 17  
 And thy princes eat at due hours,  
 For strength and not for revelry!  
 Through slothful hands the roof falleth in, 18  
 And through lazy hands the house leaketh.  
 They turn bread and wine, which cheereth life, into revelry: 19  
 And the money of—(the people?)—is made to supply both.  
 Nevertheless do not revile the king even in thy thoughts, 20  
 And do not revile the prince even in thy bed-chamber,  
 Lest the bird of the air carry the report  
 And the winged tribes tell the story.

*But in a wise  
 Use and a wise  
 Enjoyment of  
 the Present  
 Life:*

CAST thy bread upon the waters, XI. 1  
 For in process of time thou mayest find the good of it:  
 Give a portion to seven, and even to eight, 2

Chap. XI.,  
 vv. 1—8.

---

VERSES 18, 19. The slothful prodigal rulers, under whose mal-administration the whole fabric of the State was fast falling into decay, extorted the means for their profligate revelry from their toilworn and oppressed subjects. It is significant of the caution induced by the extreme tyranny of the time, that the whole description is conveyed in proverbs capable of being interpreted in more senses than one; and that, in verse 19, the writer leaves a blank, a hiatus, which we have to fill up with "the people" or some kindred phrase.



For thou knowest not what calamity may come upon the earth.  
When the clouds are full of rain 3  
They empty it upon the earth ;  
And when the tree falleth, in South or North,  
In the place where the tree falleth there doth it lie :  
Whoso therefore watcheth the wind shall not sow, 4  
And he who observeth the clouds shall not reap ;  
As thou knowest the course of the wind 5  
As little as that of the fœtus in the womb of the pregnant,  
So thou knowest not the work of God  
Who worketh all things :  
Sow then thy seed in the morning, 6  
And stay not thy hand in the evening,  
Since thou knowest not which shall prosper, this or that,  
Or whether both shall prove good ;  
And the light shall be sweet to thee 7  
And it shall be pleasant to thine eyes to behold the sun :  
For even if a man should live many years, 8  
He ought to rejoice in them all,  
And to remember that there will be many dark days ;  
Yea, that all that is coming is vanity.

*Combined with  
a steadfast  
Faith in the  
Life to come.*

Chap. XI.,  
v. 9, to  
Chap. XII.,  
v. 7.

REJOICE, O young man, in thy youth, 9  
 And let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth ;  
 And pursue the ways of thine heart  
 And that which thine eyes desire :  
 And know that in respect of all these  
 God will bring thee into judgment :  
 Banish therefore care from thy mind, 10  
 And put away sadness from thy body ;  
 For youth and manhood are vanity :  
 And remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth, xii. 1  
 Before the evil days come,  
 And the years of which thou shalt say,  
 ‘ I have no pleasure in them : ’  
 Before the sun becometh dark 2  
 And the light, and the moon, and the stars ;  
 And the clouds return after the rain :  
 When the keepers of the house shall quake, 3  
 And the men of power shall writhe ;  
 When the grinding-maids shall stop because they are greatly  
 diminished,  
 And the women who look out of the windows shall be shrouded  
 in darkness,  
 And the door shall be closed on the street :

When the noise of the mills shall grow faint, 4  
And the swallow shall fly shrieking to and fro,  
And all the song-birds drop into their nests :  
The very people shall be affrighted at that which is coming from  
the height, 5  
And at the terrors which are on their way :  
The almond also shall be despised,  
And the locust be loathed,  
And the caper-berry provoke no appetite ;  
Because man goeth to his long home,  
And the mourners pace up and down the street :—  
Before the silver cord snappeth asunder, 6  
And the golden bowl escapeth ;  
Before the bucket breaketh upon the fountain,  
And the wheel is shattered at the well ;  
And the body is cast upon the earth from which it came, 7  
And the spirit returneth to God who gave it.

---

CHAP. XII. Verse 4. *The swallow, &c.* Literally, "*the bird shall arise for a noise,*" *i.e.*, the bird which flies abroad and makes a noise at the approach of a tempest ; viz., the swallow. *All the song-birds.* Literally, "all the daughters of song"—a Hebraism for "birds."

VERSE 5. *From the height, i.e.*, from heaven.

## THE EPILOGUE.

*In which the Problem of the Book is conclusively solved.*

*Chap. XII. vv. 8 to 14.*



ANITY of vanities saith the Preacher, 8  
All is vanity!  
And not only was the Preacher wise; 9  
He also taught the people wisdom,  
And composed many parables with care and thought.  
The Preacher sought out comfortable words, 10  
And wrote down the words of truth with uprightness.  
The words of the Wise are like goads, 11  
And those of the Masters of the Assemblies like fixed stakes,  
Given by the same Shepherd.  
And of what is more than these, my son, beware: 12  
For of making of many books there is no end,  
And much study is a weariness to the flesh.

THE CONCLUSION of the matter is this :—	13
That God taketh cognizance of all things :	
Fear God therefore and keep His commandments ;	
For this it behoveth all men to do,	
Since God will bring every deed to the judgment	14
Appointed for every secret thing,	
Whether it be good or whether it be bad.	

---

VERSE 13. *God taketh cognizance of all things.* Literally, "Everything is noted" or "noticed," *i.e.* by God the Judge. Ginsburg conjectures, and with reason, that the Sacred Name was omitted from this clause of the verse, simply because the Author wished to reserve it for the more emphatic clause which follows it.



EXPOSITION.






## THE PROLOGUE:

*In Which the Problem of the Book is Indirectly Stated.*

*Chap. I., vv. 1—11.*

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HE search for the *Summum Bonum*, the Quest of the Chief Good, is the theme of the Book Ecclesiastes. Naturally we look to find this theme, this problem, this "riddle of the painful earth," distinctly stated in the opening verses of the Book. It is stated, but not distinctly. For the Book is a drama, not an essay or a treatise. And a dramatist conveys his conceptions of human character and circumstance and action, not by direct picturesque descriptions, but, placing men before us, he makes them speak to us, and leaves us to infer their character and condition from their words. In strict accordance with the rules of his art, the dramatic *Preacher* brings men upon the stage of his poem, permits us to hear their most secret characteristic utterances, and thus enables us to conceive and judge them. He is true to his artistic canons from the very outset. His Prologue, unlike that of the Book of Job, is cast in the dramatic form. Instead of introducing the drama with a brief narrative, or a clear statement of

the moral problem he is about to discuss, he opens with the characteristic utterances of the man who, wearied with many futile endeavours, gathers up his remaining strength for a last attempt to discover the Chief Good of Life. Like Browning, one of the most dramatic of modern poets, he plunges at once into his theme, and speaks to us from the first through "feigned lips." Just as in reading one of Browning's most perfect poems, we have first to glance through it in order to collect the scattered hints which indicate the speaker and the time, and then laboriously to think ourselves back, by their help, into the time and the conditions of the speaker; so also with this Hebrew Poem. It opens abruptly with "words of the Preacher" who is at once the author and the hero of the drama. A voice breaks the silence of the distant Past to cry to us "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" For what intent does it break the silence? Of what moral mood is this pathetic note the expression? What compels this perturbed spirit to revisit the glimpses of the moon and raise its warning voice?

It is the old contrast—old as literature, old as man—between the ordered steadfastness of nature and the disorder and brevity of human life. The Preacher stands gazing out on the universe above and around him. The ancient earth is strong and firm beneath his feet. The sun runs its race with joy, sinks exhausted into its ocean-bed, but rises on the morrow, like a giant refreshed with

old wine, to renew its course. The variable and inconstant wind, which bloweth where it listeth, blows from the same quarters, veers through the very circuit, it haunted in the time of the world's grey fathers. The streams which ebb and flow, which go and come, run along time-worn beds and are fed from their ancient source. But man, "to one point constant never," shifts from change to change, from disorder to disorder. As compared with the calm order and uniformity of nature, his life is a mere phantasy, passing for ever through a limited and tedious range of forms, each of which is unsubstantial as the fabric of a vision, many of which are as base as they are unreal, and all of which, for ever in a flux, elude the grasp of those who pursue them, or disappoint those who hold them in their hands. "All is vanity; for man has no profit," no adequate and enduring reward, "for all his labour:" less happy, because less stable, than the earth on which he dwells, he comes and goes, while the earth goes on for ever (verses 2—4).

This painful contrast between the ordered stability of nature and the changeful disorder of human life is emphasized by a detailed reference to the large natural forces which rule the world, and which abide unchanged, although to us they seem the very types of change. The figure of the fifth verse is, of course, that of the racer. The sun rises every morning to run its course, pursues it through the day, "pants" as one wellnigh breathless towards its goal, and sinks at night into its subterraneous bed in the

sea ; but, though exhausted and breathless at night, it rises again on the morrow refreshed, and eager, like a strong swift man, to renew its daily race. In the sixth verse, the wind is represented as having a regular law and circuit, though it now blows South and now veers round to the North. The East and West are not mentioned, probably because they are tacitly referred to in the rising and setting sun of the previous verse : all the four quarters are included between the two. In the seventh verse, the streams are described as returning on their sources : but there is no allusion here, as we might suppose, to tides—and indeed tidal rivers are rare. The reference is to an ancient conception of the physical order of nature held by the Hebrew as by other races, according to which the ocean, fed by the streams, sent back a constant supply, through subterraneous passages and channels : through these they supposed the rivers to return to the place whence they came. The ruling sentiment of these verses is that, while all the natural elements and forces, even the most variable and inconstant, renew their strength and return upon their course, for frail man there is no return : permanence and uniformity characterize them, while transitoriness and instability mark him for their own. They seem to vanish and disappear : the sun sinks, the winds lull, the streams run dry ; but they all come back again : for him there is no coming back ; once gone, he is gone for ever.

But it is vain to talk of these or other instances of the steadfast order of the universe: "Man cannot utter it." For, besides these elemental illustrations, the world is crowded with illustrations and proofs of the stability of nature, the stability which underlies all surface changes. So numerous are they, so innumerable, that the curious eye and inquisitive ear of man would be worn out before they had completed the tale; and if eye and ear could never be satisfied with hearing and seeing, how much less the slower tongue with speaking (verse 8)? All through the universe what has been still is: what was done is done still: the sun is still running the same race, the winds are still blowing from the old points, the streams are still flowing between the same banks and returning by the same channels. If any man suppose that he has discovered new phenomena, any natural fact which has not been repeating itself from the beginning, it is only because he is ignorant of that which took place from of old, long years before he was born (verses 9, 10). Yet, while in nature all things return on their course and abide for ever, man's day is soon spent, his force soon exhausted. *He* does not return: nay, he is not so much as remembered by those who come after him. Just as we have forgotten those who were before us, so those who live after us will forget us (verse 11). The burden of all this unintelligible life lies heavily on the Preacher's soul. The miseries and confusions of our lot baffle and oppress his thoughts.

Above all, the contrast between Nature and Man, between its massive and stately permanence and the frailty and brevity of our existence, breeds in him the despairing mood of which we have the key-note in his cry, "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity!"

Yet this is not the only, not the inevitable, mood of the mind as it ponders that great contrast. We have learned to look on it with other, perhaps with wider, eyes. We say: "How grand, how soothing, how hopefully prophetic is the spectacle of Nature's uniformity! How it raises us above the fluctuations of inward thought and gladdens us with a sense of stability and repose! As we see the ancient inviolable laws working out into the same beautiful and gracious results day after day and year by year, and reflect that "what hath been still is, and that which hath been done is done still," we are redeemed from our bondage to vanity and corruption: we look up with composed and reverent trust to Him who is our God and Father, and onwards to the stable and glorious immortality we are to spend with Him. 'Art not Thou from everlasting, O Lord our God, our Holy One?\*' We shall not lie, but live.'"

But if we did not know the Ruler of great nature's frame to be our God and Father; if our thoughts had

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\* Habakkuk I., 12.



still "to jump the life to come," or to leap at it with a mere guess ; if we had to cross the dark deep gulf of death on no stronger bridge than a Peradventure : if, in short, our life were infinitely more troubled than it is, and the true good of life and its bright hope were still to seek,—how would it be with us then ? Then, like the Preacher, we might feel the steadfastness and uniformity of nature as an affront to our vanity and weakness. In place of drinking in hope and composure from the fair visage and unbroken order of the universe, we might deem that its face were darkened by a malignant frown or writhed in bitter irony. Then, instead of finding in its inviolable order and permanence a hopeful prophecy of *our* recovery into an unbroken order and an enduring peace, we might passionately demand why, on an abiding earth and under an unchanging heaven, we should die and be forgotten ; why, more inconstant than the variable wind, more evanescent than the parching stream, one generation should go never to return, and another generation come to enjoy the gains of those who were before them, and to blot their memory from the earth.

This indeed has been the impassioned protest and outcry of man in every age. All literature is full of it. The contrast between the peaceful unchanging sky, with its myriads of calm lustrous stars, which are always there and always in a happy concert, and the frailty of man rushing blindly through his brief and perturbed course

has lent its ground tones to the poetry of all races. We meet it everywhere. It is the oldest of old songs. In all the languages of the divided earth we hear how the generations of men pass swiftly and stormfully across its bosom, "searching the serene heavens with the inquest of their beseeching looks," but winning no response; asking always, and always in vain, "Why are we thus? why are we thus? frail as the moth and of few days as the flower?" It is this contrast between the serenity and stability of nature and the frailty and turbulence of man which afflicts Coleridge and drives him to conclusions of despair. Here is man, "so noble in reason, so infinite in faculty, in apprehension so like a god," longing with a divine intensity for the peace which results from the equipoise and happy occupation of his various powers: yet, see, his whole life is wasted in labours and tumults and sorrowful perplexities; he goes to his grave with his cravings unsatisfied, his powers untrained, unharmonised, knowing no rest till he lies in the narrow bed from which is no uprising! What wonder if to such an one as he, "this goodly frame, the earth, seems but a sterile promontory," stretching out a little space into the dark infinite void; "this most excellent canopy, the air . . . this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire," nothing but "a foul pestilential congregation of vapours"? What wonder if, for him, the very beauty of nature should change into a repulsive hideousness, and



its steadfast unchanging order be held a satire on the disorder and vanity of his life?

Solomon moreover—and it is Solomon in his old age, sated and weary, whom the Preacher sets before us—had had large experience of life, had tried its ambitions, its lusts, its pleasures: he had tested every promise of good which it held forth, and found them all lies: he had drunk of every stream and found no pure living water that could slake his thirst. And men such as he, sated but not satisfied, jaded with voluptuous delights and without the peace of faith, commonly look out upon the world with haggard eyes. They feed their despair on the natural order and purity which they feel to be a rebuke to the impurity of their own restless and perturbed hearts. Many of us have no doubt stood on Richmond Hill, and looked with softening eyes on the rich pastures dotted with cattle, broken with clumps of trees, through which shoot up village-spires, while the placid Thames winds in many a curve through pasture and wood. It is not a grand or romantic scene; but on a quiet evening, in the long level rays of the setting sun, it is a scene to inspire content and lowly peaceful thoughts. Wilberforce tells us that he once stood on the balcony of a villa looking down on this scene. Beside him stood the owner of the villa, a duke notorious for his profligacy in a profligate age; and as they looked across the stream, the duke cried out, “O that river! there it runs, on and on, and I so

weary of it!" And *there* you have the very mood of Ecclesiastes; the mood in which the fair smiling heavens and the gracious bountiful earth carry no benediction of peace, because they are reflected from a heart all tossed into crossing and impure waves.

All things depend on the heart we bring to them. This very contrast between Nature and Man has no despair in it, breeds no dispeace or anger in the heart at leisure from itself and at peace with God. Teunyson, for instance, makes a merry musical brook sing to us on this theme. Listen as I touch a note or two of its song:—

I come from haunts of eoot and hern,  
I make a sudden sally  
And sparkle out among the fern,  
To bicker down a valley.

I chatter over stony ways  
In little sharps and trebles,  
I bubble into eddyng bays,  
I babble on the pebbles.

I chatter, chatter as I flow  
To join the brimming river;  
*For men may come and men may go,  
But I go on for ever.*

I steal by lawns and grassy plots,  
I slide by hazel covers;  
I move the sweet forget-me-nots  
That grow for happy lovers.

I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance  
Among my skimming swallows ;  
I make the netted sunbeams dance  
Against my sandy shallows.

I murmur under moon and stars  
In brambly wildernesses ;  
I linger by my shingly bars ;  
I loiter round my crosses ;

And out again I curve and flow  
To join the brimming river ;  
*For men may come and men may go,  
But I go on for ever.*

You see ; it is the very plaint of the Preacher set to sweet music. He murmurs, " One generation cometh, and another generation goeth, but the earth abideth for ever ;" while the refrain of the Brook is—

For men may come and men may go,  
But I go on for ever.

Yet we do not feel that the Brook is exulting over us, or that its song should feed any mood of grief or despair. The tune that it sings to the sleeping woods all night is " a cheerful tune." By some subtle process we are made to share its bright tender hilarity. Into what a fume would the Hebrew Preacher have been thrown had any little " babbling brook " dared to sing this saucy song to him ! He would have felt it as an insult, and thought that the merry innocent creature was " crowing " over the swiftly

passing generations of men. But for the Christian Poet the Brook sings a song whose blithe dulcet strain attunes his heart to the quiet harmonies of peace and goodwill.

Again, I say, all depends on the heart we turn to nature. It was because his heart was heavy with the memory of many sins, because too the lofty Christian hopes were beyond his reach, that "the Son of David" grew mournful and bitter, or is thus represented in our Drama, as he looked at the strong ancient heavens and the stable bountiful earth, and thought of the weariness and brevity of human life.

This, then, is the mood in which the Preacher commences his Quest of the Chief Good. He is driven to it by the need of finding that in which he can rest. As a rule it is only on the stringent compulsions of need that this high Quest is undertaken. Of their own profound need of a Chief Good the vast majority of men are but seldom and faintly conscious; but to the favoured few, who are to lead and mould the public thought, it comes with a force which will let them know no peace till the Quest be achieved. It was thus with Coheleth. He could not endure to think that those who have "all things put under their feet" should lie at the mercy of accidents from which their realm is exempt; that *they* should be the mere fools of Change, while *that* abideth unchanged for ever. And therefore he set out to discover the condition in which they might become partakers of the order and stability and

peace of nature—the condition in which, raised above all tides and storms of Change, they might sit calm and serene even though the strong ancient heavens and the solid earth should vanish away. This, and only this, will he recognise as the Chief Good, the Good appropriate to the nature of man, because capable of satisfying his deepest cravings and supplying all his wants.

## FIRST SECTION.

*The Quest of the Chief Good in Wisdom and Pleasure.*

*Chap. I., v. 12, to Chap. II., v. 26.*



OPPRESSED by his profound sense of the vanity of the life which man lives amid the play of permanent natural forces, Coheleth sets out to search for that true and supreme Good which it will be well for the sons of men to pursue through the brief day of their life; the Good which will make them happy under all their toils, and be "a portion" so large and enduring as to satisfy their vast desires.

*The Quest in Wisdom.* 1. And, as was natural in so wise a man, he turns first  
*Chap. I., vv. 12—13.* to *Wisdom*. He gives himself diligently to inquire into all the actions and toils of men. He will see whether a larger acquaintance with their conditions, a juster and completer estimate of their lot, will remove the depression under which he labours. He devotes himself heartily to this Quest, and acquires a "greater wisdom than all who were before him." This wisdom is not a scientific know-  
ledge of social and political laws, nor is it the result of

philosophical speculations on "the first good and the first fair," or on the moral nature and constitution of man. It is the wisdom that is born of wide and varied experience, not of abstract study. He acquaints himself with the facts of human life, with the circumstances, thoughts, feelings, hopes, and aims of all sorts and conditions of men. He is fain to know "all that men do under the sun," "all that is done under heaven." Like the good Caliph of Arabian story, "the good Haroun Alraschid," we may suppose that Coheleth goes forth in disguise to visit all quarters of the city; to talk with barbers, druggists, calenders, with merchants and mariners, husbandmen and tradesmen, mechanics and artisans; to try conclusions with travellers and with the blunt wits of homekeeping men. He will look with his own eyes and learn for himself what their lives are like, how they conceive of the human lot, and what, if any, are the mysteries which sadden and perplex them. He will ascertain whether *they* have any key that will unlock his perplexities, any wisdom that will solve his problems or help him to bear his burden with a more cheerful heart. Because his depression was fed by every fresh contemplation of the order of the universe, he turns from nature to the study of man. But this also he finds a heavy and disappointing task. After a complete and dispassionate scrutiny, when he has "seen *much* wisdom and knowledge," he concludes that man has no fair reward "for all his labours that he laboureth under



the sun," that no wisdom avails to set straight that which is crooked in human affairs or to bring back into the number of the living those who have "gone." The sense of vanity bred by his contemplation of the stedfast order of nature only grows more profound as he reflects on the numberless and manifold disorders which afflict humanity. And therefore, before he ventures on a new experiment, he makes a pathetic appeal to the heart which he had so earnestly applied to the search, and in which he had stored up so large and various a knowledge, and confesses that "even this is vexation of spirit," that "in much wisdom is much sadness," and that "to multiply knowledge is to multiply sorrow."

Now whether we consider the nature of the case or the conditions of the time in which this Book was written, we shall not be surprised at the mournful conclusion to which he comes. For the time was full of oppressions and cruel wrongs. Life was insecure. To acquire property was to court extortion. The captive Hebrews, and even the conquering race which ruled them, were slaves to the caprice of satraps and magistrates whose days were wasted in revelry and in the unbridled indulgence of their lusts. And to go among the various conditions of men groaning under a despotism so terrible, to see all the fair rewards of honest toil withheld, the noble degraded and the foolish exalted, the righteous trodden down by the feet of the wicked : all this was not likely to quicken cheerful thoughts



in a wise man's heart ; instead of solving, it could but complicate and darken the problems over which he was already brooding in despair.

And apart from the special wrongs and oppressions of the time, it is inevitable in all times that the thoughtful student of men and manners should become a sadder as he becomes a wiser man. To multiply knowledge, at least of this kind, is to multiply sorrow. We need not be cynics and leave our tub only to reflect on the dishonesty of our neighbours ; we need only go through the world with open observant eyes in order to learn that "in much wisdom is much sadness." Recall the wisest of modern times, those who have had the most intimate acquaintance with man and men,—Göethe, Carlyle, Thackeray, for example ; are they not all touched with a profound sadness ? \* Do they not look with some scorn

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\* Père Lacordaire has a fine passage on this theme. "Weak and little minds find here below a nourishment which suffices for their intellect and satisfies their love. They do not discover the emptiness of visible things because they are incapable of sounding them to the bottom. But a soul whom God has drawn nearer to the Infinite very soon feels the narrow limits within which it is pent ; it experiences moments of inexpressible sadness, the cause of which for a long time remains a mystery : it even seems as though some strange concurrence of events must have chanced in order thus to disturb its life, and all the while the trouble comes from a higher source. In reading the lives of the saints, we find that nearly all of them have felt that sweet melancholy of which the ancients said that *there was no genius without it*. In fact, melancholy is inseparable from every mind that looks below the surface and every heart that feels profoundly. Not that we should take complacency in it, for it is a malady that enervates when we do not shake it off ; and it has but two remedies—

on the common life of the mass of men, with its base passions and pleasures, struggles and rewards? and, in proportion as they have the spirit of Christ, is not their very scorn kindly, springing from a pity which lies deeper than itself? Did not even the Master Himself, though full of ruth and grace, share their feeling as He saw publicans growing rich by extortion, hypocrites mounting to Moses' chair, subtle cruel foxes couched on thrones, and the blind multitude following their blind leaders into the ditch? In His pure and awful eyes did not the great bulk of His generation assume the form of a hideous struggling "knot of vipers," stinging and being stung? Nay, if we look out upon the world of to-day, can we say that the majority of men are wise and pure? Is it always the swift who win the race, and the strong who carry off the honours of the battle? Do none of our "intelligent lack bread," nor any of the learned favour? Are there no fools lifted to high places to show with how little wisdom the world is governed, and no noble heroic breasts dinted by the blows of hostile circumstance or wounded by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? Are all our workmen diligent, and all our masters fair? In our Trade Unions are there no tyrants as dastardly

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*Death or God.*" Elsewhere, still quite in the spirit of the Preacher, he says: "Every day I feel more and more that all is vanity. *I cannot leave my heart in this heap of mud.*"

and oppressive as any who sit on thrones? Are no false balances and false measures known in our shops, and no frauds on our exchanges? Are no homes dungeons, with fathers and husbands for jailors? Do we never hear, as we stand without, the sound of cruel blows and the shrieks of tortured captives? Are there no hypocrites in our churches, none "that with devotion's visage sugar o'er" an evil heart? and do the best men always rise to the highest place and honour? Are there none in our midst who have to bear

the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes?

Alas, if we think to find the true Good in a wide and varied knowledge of the conditions of men, their hopes and fears, their struggles and successes, their loves and hates, their rights and wrongs, their pleasures and their pains, we shall but share the defeat of the Preacher, and repeat his bitter cry, "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity!"

2. But if we cannot reach the object of our Quest in Wisdom, we may perchance find it in *Pleasure*: mirthful enjoyment may have a charm for the sorrows which wisdom has bred. This experiment has also been tried, tried on the largest scale and under the most favourable conditions. Wisdom failing to satisfy the large desires of his

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*The Quest in Pleasure.*  
Chap. II., vv. 1—11.

soul, or even to lift it from its depression, the Preacher turns to mirth. Once more, as he forthwith announces, he is disappointed in the result. He pronounces mirth a brief madness: in itself, like wisdom, a good, it is not the Chief Good; to make it supreme is to rob it of its natural charm.

Not content however with this general verdict, Coheleth recounts the details of his experiment. Speaking in the person of Solomon, he claims to have started on this quest with the greatest advantages; for "what is the man that cometh after the king whom they made king long ago?" He surrounded himself with all the luxuries of an Oriental prince. He built himself new costly palaces, as the Sultan of Turkey does, or did, almost every year. He laid out paradises, planted them with vines and fruit-trees of every sort, and large shady groves to screen off and attemper the heat of the sun. He dug great tanks and reservoirs of water, and cut channels which carried the cool vital stream through the gardens and to the roots of the trees. He bought men and maids, and surrounded himself with the retinue of servants and slaves requisite to keep his magnificent palaces and paradises in order, to serve his sumptuous tables, to swell the pomp of his public appearances: in fact, he gathered together such a train of ministers, attendants, domestics, indoor and outdoor slaves, as is still thought necessary to the dignity of an Oriental "lord." His herds and flocks, a main source

of Oriental wealth, were of finer strain and larger in number than had been known before. He amassed enormous treasures of silver and gold, the common Oriental hoard. He collected the peculiar treasures of kings and of the kingdoms;\* whatever special commodity was yielded by any foreign land was caught up for his use by his officers or presented him by his allies. He hired eminent musicians and singers, and gave himself to those delights of harmony which have had a peculiar charm for the Hebrews of all ages. He crowded his harem with the beauties of his own and foreign lands. He withheld nothing from them that his eyes desired, and kept not his heart from any pleasure. He set himself seriously to make happiness his portion; and while alluring his body with pleasures, he did not rush into them with the blind eagerness "whose violent property foredoes itself" and defeats its own ends. His "mind guided him wisely" amid his delights; his "wisdom helped him" to select and combine and vary them, to enhance and prolong their power by a certain art and temperance in the enjoyment of them.

He built his soul a lordly pleasure-house,  
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell;  
He said, 'Oh Soul, make merry and carouse,  
Dear Soul, for all is well.'

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\* In speaking of the Persian Revenue, Rawlinson says that besides a definite money payment, "a payment, the nature and amount of which was

Alas, all was not well, though he took much pains to make and think it well. Even his choice delights soon palled upon his taste, and brought on conclusions of disgust. Even in his lordly pleasure-house he was haunted by the grim menacing spectres which had troubled him before it was built; they "flitted" with him when he went up to dwell in it. In the harem, in the paradise he had planted, under the groves, beside the fountains, at the sumptuous banquet—a bursting bubble, a falling leaf, an empty wine cup, a passing blush sufficed to bring back the thought of the brevity of life. When he had run the full career of pleasure and turned to contemplate his delights and the labour it had cost him to obtain them, he found that these also were vanity and vexation of spirit, that there was no "profit" in them, that they could not satisfy the deep incessant craving of the soul for a true and lasting Good.

Is not his sad verdict as true as it is sad? We have not his wealth of resources. Nevertheless our hearts may have been as intent on pleasure as was his. We may have pursued whatever sensual, intellectual, or æsthetic excitements were open to us with a growing eagerness till we have lived in a craving whirl of stimulated desire, in which

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also fixed, had to be made in kind, each province being required to furnish that commodity, or those commodities, for which it was most celebrated:" as, for example, grain, sheep, mules, fine breeds of horses, beautiful slaves.—*The Five Great Monarchies*, Vol. iv. chap. vii. p. 421.



the claims of duty have been neglected and the rebukes of conscience unheeded. And if we have passed through this experience, if we have been carried for a time into this giddy round; have we not come out of it jaded, exhausted, despising ourselves for our folly, disgusted with what once seemed the very top and crown of delight? Do we not mourn, our after life through, over energies wasted and opportunities lost? Are we not sadder, if wiser men, for our brief frenzy? As we return to the sober duties and simple joys of life, do not we say to Mirth, "Thou art mad!" and to Pleasure, "What canst thou do?" Ah, yes; our verdict is that of the Preacher, "Lo, this too is vanity!"

3. It is characteristic of the philosophic temper of our Author, I think, that after pronouncing Wisdom and Mirth vanities in which the true Good is not to be found, he does not at once proceed to try a new experiment, but pauses to compare these two "vanities," and to reason out his preference of one over the other. *His* vanity is wisdom. For it is only in one respect that he puts mirth and wisdom on an equality, viz. that they neither of them are, or contain, the supreme Good. In all other respects he affirms wisdom to be as much better than pleasure as light is better than darkness, as much better as it is to have eyes that see the light than to be blind and walk in a constant gloom (vv. 12—14).

*Wisdom and Mirth  
Compared.*

Chap. II., vv. 12—23.

It is because wisdom is a light and enables men to see that he accords it his preference. It is by the light of wisdom that he has learned the vanity of mirth, nay the insufficiency of wisdom itself. But for that light he might still be pursuing pleasures which could not satisfy, or laboriously acquiring a knowledge which would only deepen his sadness. Wisdom had opened his eyes to see that he must seek the Good which gives rest and peace in other regions. He no longer goes on his Quest in utter blindness, with all the world before him where to choose, but with no indications of the course he should, or should not, take. He has already learned that two large provinces of human life will not yield him what he seeks, that he must expend no more of his brief day and failing energies on these.

Therefore wisdom is better than mirth. Nevertheless it is not best, nor can it remove the dejection of a thoughtful heart. Somewhere there is, there must be, that which is better still. For wisdom cannot explain to him why the same fate should befall both the sage and the fool (v. 15), nor can it abate the anger that burns within him against so potent and flagrant an injustice.\* Wisdom cannot even explain

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\* Compare Psalm xlix. 10, 11 :—

Wise men also die,  
And priests together, as well as the ignorant and the foolish,  
And leave their riches for others ;



why, even if the sage must die no less than the fool, both must be forgotten well-nigh as soon as they are gone (vv. 16, 17); nor can it soften the hatred of life and its labours which this lesser yet obvious injustice has kindled in his heart. Nay, wisdom, for all so brightly as it shines, throws no light on an injustice which, if of lower degree, frets and perplexes his thoughts;—why a man who has laboured prudently and dexterously and acquired great gains should, when he dies, leave all to one who has not laboured therein, without even the poor consolation of knowing whether he will be a wise man or a fool (vv. 19—21). In short, the whole skein of life is in a dismal tangle, which wisdom itself, dearly as he loves it, cannot unravel; and the tangle is this, that man has no fair “profit” from his labours, “since his task grieveth and vexeth him all his days, and even at night his heart hath no rest;” and when he dies he loses all his gains for ever, and cannot so much as be sure that his heir will have any good of them. This, then, is vanity (vv. 22, 23).

And yet—and yet, good things are surely good, and there is a wise gracious enjoyment of earthly delights! It is right that man should eat and drink and take a natural

✓ The Conclusion.

Chap. II. vv. 24—6.

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Nay, the grave is their everlasting habitation,  
 Their dwelling-place from generation to generation,  
 They who were had in honour throughout the land!

pleasure in his toils. Who indeed has a stronger claim than the labourer himself to eat and enjoy the fruit of his labours? Still, even this natural enjoyment is the gift of God; apart from His blessing the heaviest toils will produce but a scanty harvest and the faculty of enjoying it may be lacking. It is lacking to the sinner: his task is to heap up gains which the good will inherit. But he that is good before God will have the gains of the sinner added to his own, and wisdom to enjoy both. This, whatever appearance may sometimes suggest, is the law of God's giving: that the good shall have abundance while the bad lack; that more shall be given to him that hath, while from him who hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. Nevertheless even this wise enjoyment of temporal good does not and cannot satisfy the craving heart of man: even this, when it is made the ruling aim and chief good of life, is vexation of spirit.

Thus the first Act of the Drama closes with a negation. The moral problem is as far from being solved as at the outset. All we have learned is that one or two avenues along which we urge the Quest will not lead us to the true and enduring Good. As yet the Preacher has only the *ad interim* conclusion to offer us, that both Wisdom and Mirth are good, though neither is the supreme Good; that we are therefore to acquire wisdom and knowledge and to blend pleasure with our toils: that we are to be-

lieve pleasure and wisdom to be the gifts of God, to believe also that they are bestowed, not by caprice, but according to the law which deals out good to the good and evil to the evil. We shall have other opportunities of weighing and appraising this counsel—it is often repeated—and of seeing how it works into and forms part of Coheleth's final solution of the painful riddle of the earth, the perplexing mystery of life.

## SECOND SECTION.

*The Quest of the Chief Good in Devotion to the Affairs of  
Business.*

*Chap. III. v. 1, to Chap. V. v. 20.*

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F the true Good of Man is not to be found in the School where Wisdom utters her voice, nor in the Garden in which Pleasure spreads her lures : may it not be found in the Market, in devotion to Business and Public Affairs ? The Preacher will try this experiment also. He gives himself to study and consider it. But at the very outset he discovers that he is in the iron grip of immutable divine ordinances, by which “seasons” are appointed for every undertaking under heaven (v. 1), ordinances which derange man’s best-laid schemes, and “shape his ends rough-hew them how he will.” The time of birth for instance, and the time of death, are ordained by a Power over which men have no control ; they begin to be, and they cease to be, at hours whose stroke they can neither hasten nor retard. The season for sowing and the season for reaping are fixed without any reference to their wish ; they must

*The Quest obstructed  
by Divine Ordinances ;*

*Chap. III., vv. 1—15.*

plant and gather in when the unchangeable laws of Nature will permit (v. 2). Even those violent deaths, and those narrow escapes from death, which seem most purely fortuitous, are pre-determined; as are also all the accidents which befall our abodes (v. 3). So, again, if only because determined by these accidents, are the feelings with which we regard them, our weeping and our laughter, our mourning and our rejoicing (v. 4). If we only clear a plot of ground from stones in order that we may cultivate it, or that we may fence it with a wall; or if an enemy cast stones over our arable land to unfit it for uses of husbandry—a malignant act frequent in the East—and we have painfully to gather them out again: even this, which seems so purely within the scope of human freewill, is also within the scope of the divine decrees, as are the very embraces we bestow on those who are dear to us, or withhold from them (v. 5). The varying and unstable desires which prompt us to seek this object or that as earnestly as we afterwards carelessly cast it away, and the passions which impel us to rend our garments over our losses, and by-and-by to sew up the rents not without some little wonder that we should ever have been so deeply moved by that which now sits so lightly on us; these passions and desires, which at one time strike us dumb with grief and so soon after make us voluble with joy, with all our fleeting and easily-moved hates and loves, strifes and reconciliations, all move within the circle of law, although they wear so

lawless a look, and are obsequious to the ordinances and canons of Heaven (vv. 6—8). They travel their cycles; they return in their appointed order. The uniformity of Nature is reproduced in the uniform recurrence of the chances and changes of human life; for in this as in that God repeats Himself, recalling the past (v. 15). The thing that hath been is that which is and will be. Social laws are as constant and as inflexible as natural laws. The social generalizations of Modern Science—as given, for instance in Buckle's "History"—are but a methodical elaboration of the conclusion at which the Preacher here arrives.

Of what use, then, was it for men to "kick against the pricks," to attempt to modify immutable ordinances? "Whatever God hath ordained continueth for ever; nothing can be added to it, and nothing can be taken from it"(v. 14). Nay, more: why should we care to alter or modify the social order? Everything is beautiful and appropriate in its time, from birth to death, from war to peace (v. 11). If we cannot find the satisfying Good in the events and affairs of life, in its recurring times and seasons, that is not because we could devise a happier order for them, but because God "hath put *eternity* into our hearts," as well as time, and did not intend that we should be satisfied till we attain an eternal good. If only we "understood" that, if only we knew God's design for us "from beginning to end," and suffered eternity no less than time to have its

due of us, we should not fret ourselves in vain endeavours to change the unchangeable, or to find an enduring good in that which is perishable and fugitive. We should rejoice and do ourselves good all our brief life (v. 12); we should eat and drink and take pleasure in our labours (v. 13); we should feel that this faculty of innocently enjoying simple pleasures and wholesome toils is "a gift of God:" we should conclude that God had ordained that regular cycle and order of events which so often frustrates the wish and endeavour of the moment, in order that we should fear Him in place of relying on ourselves (v. 14), and trust our future to Him who so wisely and graciously recalls the past.

But not only are our endeavours to find the true Good thwarted by the gracious inflexible laws of the just God: they are often baffled by the injustice of ungracious men. In the days of Coheleth, Iniquity sat in the seat of justice, wresting all rules of equity to its base private ends (v. 16). Unjust judges and rapacious satraps put the fair rewards of labour and skill and integrity in jeopardy; insomuch that if a man by industry and thrift, by a wise observance of the divine laws and seasons, had acquired affluence, he was too often, in the expressive Eastern phrase, but as a sponge which any petty despot might squeeze. The frightful oppressions of the time were a heavy burden to the Hebrew Preacher. He brooded over them, seeking for "aids to faith" and comfortable words wherewith to solace

(2) *And by Human Injustice and Perversity.*

Chap. III., v. 16, to  
Chap. IV., v. 3.



the oppressed. For a moment he thought he had lit on the true comfort. "Well, well," he said within himself, "*God* will judge the righteous and the wicked; for there is a time for everything and for every deed with Him" (v. 17). Could he have rested in this thought it would have been "a sovereign balm" to him, or indeed to any other Hebrew; although to us, who have learned to desire the redemption rather than the punishment of the wicked, their redemption *through* their inevitable punishments, the true comfort would still have been wanting. But he could not rest in it, could not hold it fast, and confesses that he could not. He lays his heart bare before us. We are permitted to trace the fluctuations of his thought and feeling. No sooner has he whispered to his heart that God, who is at leisure from Himself and has endless time at His command, will visit the oppressors and avenge the oppressed, than his thoughts take a new turn, and he adds: "And yet, God *may* have chosen the children of men only to show them that they are no better than the beasts" (v. 18). \* Repugnant as the thought is, it nevertheless fascinates him for the instant. He yields to its wasting and degrading magic. He not only suspects, fears, thinks

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\* Compare the refrain of Psalm xlix. as given in Verse 12, and again in Verse 20—

And man in his glory, so he have no understanding,  
Is like unto the beasts that are slaughtered and perish.



that man is no better than a beast; he is quite sure of it, and proceeds to argue it out. His argument is very sweeping, very sombre. "A mere chance is man, and the beast a mere chance." Both spring from a mere accident, no one can tell how, and have a blind hazard for creator; and both are "subject to the same chance" throughout their lives, all the decisions of their intelligence and will being overruled by the decrees of an inscrutable fate. Both perish under the same power of death, suffer the same pangs of dissolution, are taken at unawares by an invisible yet resistless force. The bodies of both spring from the same dust, and moulder back into dust. Nay, "both have the same spirit;" and though vain man sometimes boasts that at death his spirit goeth upward, while that of the beast goeth downward, yet who can prove it? For himself, Coheleth doubts, and even denies it. He is absolutely convinced that in birth and life and death, in body and spirit and final fate, man is as the beast is, and hath no advantage over the beast (vv. 19—21). And therefore he falls back on his old conclusion, though now with a sadder heart than ever, that man will do wisely, that, being so blind and having so dark a prospect, he cannot do more wisely than, to take what pleasure and enjoy what good he can amid his labours. If he is a beast, nay, *as* he is a beast, let him at least learn of the beasts that simple tranquil enjoyment of the good of the passing moment, untroubled by any vexing presage of what is to come, in

which it must be allowed they are greater proficient than he (v. 22).

Thus, after rising, in the first fifteen verses of this Third Chapter, to an almost Christian height of patience and resignation and holy trust in the providence of God, Coheleth is smitten by the injustice and oppressions of man into the depths and despairs of a blank materialism.

But now a new question arises. The Preacher's survey of Human Life has shaken his faith even in the conclusion which he has announced from the first, viz.: that there is nothing better for a man than a quiet content, a busy cheerfulness, a tranquil enjoyment of the fruit of his toils. This at least he had supposed to be possible: but is it? All the activities, industries, tranquilities of life are jeopardized now by the inflexible ordinances of Heaven and again by the capricious tyranny of man. To this tyranny his countrymen are now exposed. They groan under its heaviest oppressions. As he turns and looks (chap. iv. v. 1) on their unalleviated and unfriended misery, he doubts whether content or even resignation can be expected of them. With a tender sympathy that lingers on the details of their unhappy lot and deepens into a passionate despairing melancholy, he witnesses their sufferings, and counts "the tears of the oppressed." With the emphasis of a Hebrew and an Oriental, he dwells on the fact that "*they had no comforter*," that though "their oppressors

were violent, yet had they no comforter." For throughout the East, and among the Jews to this day, the manifestation of sympathy with those who suffer is far more common and formal than it is with us. Neighbours and acquaintance are expected to pay long visits of condolence; friends and kinsfolk will travel long distances to pay them. Their respective places and duties in the house of mourning, their dress, words, bearing, precedence, are regulated by an elaborate etiquette. And, strange as it may seem to us, these visits are regarded not only as gratifying tokens of respect, but as a singular relief and consolation to the afflicted or bereaved. To the Preacher and his fellow-captives, therefore, it would be a bitter aggravation of their grief that, while suffering under the most violent oppressions of misfortune, they were compelled to forego the solace of these customary tokens of respect and sympathy. As he pondered their sad and unfriended condition, Coheleth, like Job when his comforters failed him, is moved to curse his day. The dead, he affirms, are happier than the living\*—even the dead who

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\* Xerxes, in his invasion of Greece, conceived the wish "to look upon all his host." A throne was erected for him on a hill near Abydos, sitting on which, he looked down and saw the Hellespont covered with his ships, and the vast plain swarming with his troops. As he looked, he wept; and when his uncle Artabanus asked him the cause of his tears, he replied: "There came upon me a sudden pity when I thought of the shortness of man's life, and considered that of all this host, so numerous as it is, not one will be alive when a hundred years are gone by." This is one of the most striking and best-known incidents

died so long ago, that the fate most dreaded in the East had befallen them, and the very *memory* of them had perished from the earth: while happier than either the dead, who had had to suffer in their time, or than the living, whose doom had still to be borne, were those who had never seen the light, never been born into a world all disordered and out of course (vv. 2, 3).

It is rendered hopeless by the base Origin of Human Industries.

Chap. iv., vv. 4—8.

This stinging sense of the miserable estate of his race has, however, diverted the Preacher from the conduct of the main argument he had in hand: to that he now returns (v. 4). And now he argues: "You cannot hope to get good fruit from a bad root. But the several industries in which you are tempted to seek 'the chief good and market of your time' have a most base and evil origin: they 'spring from the jealous rivalry of one with the other.' Every man tries to outdo and to outsell his neighbour; to secure a larger business, to surround himself with a wealthier luxury, or to amass an ampler hoard of gold. This business-life of yours is utterly selfish and therefore

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in the life of the Persian despot; but the rejoinder of Artabanus, though in a far higher strain, is less generally known. I quote it here as an illustration of the Preacher's mood. Said Artabanus: "And yet there are sadder things in life than that. Short as our time is, there is no man, whether it be here among this multitude or elsewhere, who is so happy as not to have felt the wish—I will not say once, but full many a time—that he were dead rather than alive. Calamities fall upon us, sicknesses vex and harass us, and make life, short though it be, to appear long. *So death, through the wretchedness of our life, is a most sweet refuge to our race.*"—*Herodotus*, Book vii., c. 46.

utterly base. You are not content with a sufficient provision for simple wants. You do not seek your neighbour's good. You have no noble or patriotic aim. Your ruling intention is to enrich yourselves at the expense of your neighbours, who are your rivals rather than your neighbours, and who try to get the better of you just as you try to get the better of them. Can you hope to find the true Good in a life whose aims are so sordid, whose motives so selfish? Why, the very sluggard who folds his hands in indolence so long as he has bread to eat is a wiser man than you; for he has at least his 'handful of quiet,' knows some little enjoyment of his life; while you, driven on by jealous competition and the eager cravings of insatiable desires, have no leisure and no appetite for enjoyment: both your hands are full, indeed, instead of one, but there is no quiet in them, only labour, labour, labour, with vexation of spirit" (vv. 5, 6).

So intense and selfish was this rivalry, increase of appetite growing by what it fed upon, so keen grew the mere desire to amass, that the Preacher paints a portrait of a man for which no doubt many a *Hebrew* might have sat—of a man? nay, rather of a miser—who, though solitary and kinless, with not even a son or a brother to inherit his wealth, nevertheless hoards up riches to the close of his life; there is no end to his labours; he never can be rich enough to allow himself any enjoyment of his gains (vv. 7, 8).

Yet these are capable  
of a nobler Motive  
and Mode.

Chap. iv., vv. 9—16.

Now a jealous rivalry culminating in mere avarice,—that surely is not the wisest or noblest spirit of which those are capable who devote themselves to affairs. Even “the idols of the market” may have a purer cult than that. Business, like Wisdom and Mirth, may neither be nor contain the supreme Good : still, like them, it is not in itself and of necessity an evil. There must be a better mode of devotion to it than this selfish greedy one ; and such a mode Coheleth, before he pursues his argument to its close, pauses to point out. As if anticipating a modern theory which daily grows in favour with the wiser sort of mercantile men, he suggests that co-operation\* should be substituted for competition. “Two are better than one,” he argues ; “Union is better than isolation ; conjoint labour brings the larger reward” (v. 9). To bring his suggestion home to the business-bosom of men, he uses five illustrations, four of which have a strong Oriental colouring.

The first is that of two pedestrians (v. 10) : if one should fall—and such an accident, owing to the bad roads and long cumbrous robes common in the East, was by no means infrequent,—the other is ready to set him on his feet :

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\* It may save a misconception if I say that I use this word in its etymological rather than in its modern technical sense, as indicating the spirit that should animate Christian commerce rather than as defining special modes of conducting it.



while if he is alone, the least that can befall him is that his robes will be sadly trampled and bemired before he can gather himself up again. In the second illustration (v. 11), our two travellers, wearied by their journey, sleep together at its close. Now in Syria the nights are often keen and frosty, and the heat of the day makes men more susceptible to the nightly cold. The sleeping-chambers, moreover, have only unglazed lattices which let in the frosty air as well as the welcome light; the bed is commonly a simple mat, the bedclothes only the garments worn through the day. And therefore the natives huddle together for the sake of warmth. To lie alone was to lie shivering in the chill night air. The third illustration (v. 12) is also taken from the East. Our two travellers, lying snug and warm on their common mat, buried in slumber—that “dear repose for limbs with travel tired,” were very likely to be disturbed by thieves who had dug a hole into the house, or crept under the tent, to carry off what they could. These thieves, always on the alert for travellers, are marvellously supple, rapid, and silent in their movements: but as the traveller, aware of his danger, commonly puts his “bag of needments” or valuables under his head, it does sometimes happen that the deftest thief will rouse him by withdrawing it. If one of our two wayfarers was thus aroused, he would call on his comrade for help, and between them the thief would stand a poor chance; but the solitary traveller, suddenly roused from

sleep, with no helper at hand, would stand a worse chance than the thief. The fourth illustration (v. 12) is that of the threefold cord—three strands twisted into one, which, as we all know, English no less than Hebrew, is much more than three times as strong as any one of the separate strands.

But in the fifth and most elaborate illustration (vv. 13, 14), we are once more carried back to the East. The slightest acquaintance with Oriental history will teach us how uncertain is the tenure of royal power; how often it has happened that a prisoner has been led from a dungeon to a throne, and a prince suddenly reduced to penury. Coheleth supposes such a case. On the one hand, we have a king old but not venerable, since, long as he has lived, he has not “even yet learned to be admonished:” he has led a solitary, selfish, suspicious life, secluded himself in his harem, surrounded himself with a troop of flattering freedmen and slaves. On the other hand, we have “the poor sociable youth” who has lived with all sorts and conditions of men, acquainted himself with their habits and wants and desires, and conciliated their regard. His growing popularity alarms the old despot and his minions. He is cast into prison. His wrongs and sufferings endear him to the wronged suffering people. By a sudden outbreak of popular wrath, by a revolution such as often sweeps through Eastern states, he is set free—led from the prison to the throne; while the dethroned tyrant becomes



a pensioner on his bounty, or wanders through the land a beggar asking an alms. This is the picture in the mind's eye of the Preacher; and, as he contemplates it, he rises into a kind of prophetic rapture: he cries, "I see—I see all the living who walk under the sun flocking to the sociable youth as he standeth up in his place: there is no end to the multitude of the people over whom he ruleth!" (v. 15.)

By these graphic illustrations Coheleth sets forth the superiority of the sociable over the solitary and selfish temper, of union over isolation, of the neighbourly goodwill which leads men to combine for their common weal over the jealous rivalry which prompts them to take advantage of each other and to labour each for himself alone.

But even as he urges this better happier temper on men occupied with the business and politics of the State, even as he contemplates its brightest illustration in the youthful prisoner whose winning sociable qualities have lifted him to a throne, the old mood of melancholy comes back upon him; there is the familiar pathetic break in his voice as he concludes (v. 16), that even the bright sociable youth who wins all hearts for a time will soon be forgotten, that "even this," for all so hopeful as it looks, "is vanity and vexation of spirit."

A profound gloom rests on the Second Act or Section of this Drama. It has already taught us that we are helpless

in the iron grip of laws which we had no voice in making ; that we often lie at the mercy of men whose mercy is but a caprice ; that in our origin and end, in body and spirit, in faculty and prospect, in our lives and pleasures we are no better than the beasts which perish : that the avocations into which we plunge, and amid which we seek to forget our sad estate, spring from our jealousy the one of the other, and tend to a lonely miserliness without an use or a charm. The Preacher's familiar conclusion,—“Be tranquil ; be content ; enjoy as much as you can :” even this has grown doubtful to him. He has seen the brightest promise come to nought. In a new and profounder sense, “All is vanity and vexation of spirit.”

But though passing through a great darkness, the Preacher sees, and reflects, some little light. Even when facts seem flatly to contradict it, he holds fast to the conclusion that wisdom is better than folly, and kindness better than selfishness, and to do good even though you lose by it better than to do evil and gain by it. His faith wavers only for a moment ; it never altogether lets go its hold. And in the Fifth Chapter the light grows, though even here the darkness does not wholly disappear. We are sensible that the twilight in which we stand is not that of evening, which will deepen into night, but that of morning, which will shine more and more until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in the calm heaven of patient tranquil hearts.

The men of affairs are led from the avocations of the Market and the intrigues of the Divan into the House of God. Our first glance at the worshippers is not hopeful or inspiring. For here are men who offer sacrifices in lieu of obedience; and here are men whose prayers are a vain voluble repetition of phrases which run far in advance of their limping thoughts and desires: and there are men very quick to make vows in moments of peril, but slow to redeem them when the peril is past. At first the House of God looks very like a House of Merchandise, in which brokers and traders drive a traffic quite as dishonest as any that disgraces the Exchange. But while the merchants and courtiers stand criticizing the conduct of the worshippers, the Preacher turns upon them and shows them that *they* are the worshippers whom they criticize: that he has held up a glass in which they see themselves as others see them; that it is *they* who vow and do not pay, *they* who hurry on their mouths to utter words which their hearts do not prompt, *they* who take the roundabout course of sinning and sacrificing for sin instead of that plain road of obedience which leads straight to God.

But what comfort for them is there in that? How should it help them to be thus beguiled into condemning themselves? Truly, there would not be much comfort in it, did not the compassionate Preacher forthwith disclose the secret of this dishonest worship, and give them counsels for amendment.

So also a happier and more effective Method of Worship is open to Men:

Chap. v., vv. 1—7.

He discloses this secret in two verses, which have much perplexed the Commentators—viz., verses 3 and 7. He there explains that just as dreams come from the multitude of thoughts that have been in the mind during the day, so also the vain show of worship springs from the multitude of affairs which men permit to occupy and distract their thoughts. In effect he says to them: “You men of affairs too often get little help or comfort from the worship of God, because you come to it with pre-occupied hearts; because you are so entangled in the cares of life that you cannot extricate yourselves from the net even when you go to Synagogue. Hence it is that you often promise more than you care to perform, and utter prayers more devout and earnest than any fair expression of your desires would be, and offer sacrifices to avoid the charge and trouble of obedience to the divine laws. Now as I have shown you a more excellent way of transacting business than that selfish grasping mode to which you are addicted, so also I will show you a more excellent style of worship. Go to the House of God ‘with a straight foot,’ a foot trained to walk in the path of holy obedience. Keep your heart, lest it should be diverted from the devout homage it should pay. Do not urge and press your heart to a false emotion or your mouth to an insincere utterance. Let your words be few and reverent when you speak to the Great King. Do not vow except under the compulsion of steadfast resolves, and pay your vows even to your own hurt when once they are

made. Do not anger God with idle talk and idle half-meant resolves. But in all the exercises of your worship show a holy fear of the Almighty; and then, under the worst oppressions of fortune and the heaviest calamities of time, you shall find the House of God *a Sanctuary*, and His worship a strength, a consolation, a delight." This was very wholesome counsel for men of business—was it not?

Not content with this, however, the Preacher goes on to show how, when they returned from the House of God to the common round of their life, and were once more exposed to its miseries and distractions, there were certain comfortable and sustaining thoughts on which they might stay their spirits. To the worship of the Sanctuary he would have them add a strengthening trust in the Providence of God. That Providence was expressed, as in other ordinances, so also in these two:—

First: Whatever oppressions and perversions of justice and equity there were in the land (v. 8), still the judges and satraps who oppressed them were not supreme: there was an official hierarchy in which superior watched over superior: and if justice were not to be had of one, it might be had of another who was above him: if it were not to be had of any, no, not even of the king himself, there was still the comfortable conviction that, in the last resort, even the king was "the servant of the field" (v. 9), *i.e.*, was dependent on the wealth and produce of the land,

And a more helpful and consolatory Trust in the Divine Providence.

Chap. V., vv. 8—17.

and could not, therefore, be unjust with impunity, or push his oppressions too far lest he should decrease his revenue or depopulate his realm. This was "the advantage" the people had: and if it were in itself but a slight advantage to this man or that, clearly it was a great advantage to the body politic; while as an indication of the Providence of God, of the care with which he had arranged for the security of the poorest and meanest, it was full of consolation.

The second fact, or class of facts, in which they might recognize the gracious care of God was this,—That the unjust judges and wealthy cruel lords who oppressed them had very much less satisfaction in their fraudulent gains and luxuries than they might suppose. God had so made men that injustice and selfishness defeated their own ends, and those who lived for wealth and would do evil to acquire it made but a poor bargain after all. "He that *loveth* silver is never satisfied with silver, nor he that *loveth* riches with what they yield" (v. 10). "When riches increase, they increase that consume them"—dependents, parasites, servants, slaves flock round the man who rises to wealth and place. He cannot eat and drink more, or enjoy more, than when he was a man simply well-to-do in the world; the only advantage he has is that he sees others consume what he has acquired at so great a cost (v. 11). He cannot know the sweet refreshing sleep of husbandmen weary with toil (v. 12), for his heart is full of care and



apprehension. Robbers may drive off his flocks, or lift his cattle: his investments may fail, or his secret hoard be plundered: he must trust much to servants, and they may be unfaithful to their trust: his official superiors may ruin him with the bribes they extort, or the prince himself may want a sponge to squeeze. If none of these evils befall him, he may apprehend, and have cause to apprehend, that his heir longs for his death, and will be little better than a fool, wasting in wanton riot what he has shown such painful dexterity in storing up (vv. 13, 14). And, in any event, he cannot take his wealth with him on the last journey (vv. 15, 16). So that, naturally enough, he is much "perturbed, hath great vexation and grief" (v. 17), cannot sleep for his apprehensive care for his "abundance;" and at last must go out of the world as bare and unprovided as he came into it.\* He labours for the wind, and reaps what he has sown. Was such a life, mounting to such a close, a thing to long for and toil for? Was it worth while to hurl oneself against the adamantine laws of heaven and risk the oppressions of earth, to injure one's

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\* Compare Psalm xlix., vv. 16, 17.

Be not afraid though one be made rich,  
Or if the glory of his house be increased;  
*For he shall carry nothing away with him when he dieth,  
Neither shall his pomp follow him.*

It lends new force to the citations from this Psalm (see foot-notes on p. 136, and on p. 144), if we accept Ewald's date for it, and regard it as one of the Psalms of the Captivity.

neighbours, to sink into an insincere distracted worship and a weakening distrust of the providence of God, in order to spend anxious toilsome days and sleepless nights, and at last to go out of the world naked of all but sin, and rich in nothing but the memories of frauds and oppressions? Might not even a captive, whose sleep was sweetened by toil, and who from his holy trust in God and the sacred delights of honest worship gathered strength to endure all the oppressions of the time and to enjoy whatever alleviations and innocent pleasures came to him :—might not even he be a wiser happier man than the despot at whose caprice he stood ?

The Conclusion.

Chap. V , vv. 18—20.

For himself Coheleth has a very decided opinion on this point. He is quite sure that his first conclusion is sound, though for a moment he had doubted its soundness, and that a quiet cheerful heart is better than the wealthiest estate. With all the emphasis of renewed and now immovable conviction he declares, “ Behold, that which I have said holds good ; *it is* well for a man to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labours through the brief day of his life. And I have also said, that a man to whom God hath given riches and wealth ”—for even the rich man may be a good man and use his riches wisely—“ if He hath also enabled him to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour : this is a gift of God. He should remember that the days of his life are not many, and that God *meant* him to work for the enjoyment of his heart.”



II.\* There are not many Englishmen who devote themselves solely or mainly to the acquisition of Wisdom, and who, that they may teach the children of men what it is good for them to know, live laborious days, withdrawing from the pursuit of wealth and scorning the delights of ease. Nor do those who give themselves exclusively to the pursuit of Pleasure constitute more than a very small and miserable class, though most of us have wasted upon it days that we could ill spare. But when the Hebrew Preacher, having followed his Quest of the supreme Good in Pleasure and Wisdom, turns to the affairs of Business—and I use that term as including both commerce and politics—he enters a field of action with which we are nearly all familiar, and can hardly fail to speak words that will come home to our bosoms. For whatever else we may or may not be, we are almost all of us worshippers of the great god Traffic—a god whose wholesome benignant face too often lowers and darkens, or ever we are aware, into the sordid and malignant features of Mammon.

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\* In commenting on the Second and Third Sections of this Book I found or fancied that both the exposition of the sacred text and the application of its lessons to the details of modern life would gain in force by being handled separately. The second part of each of these Sections consists mainly, therefore, of an exhortation based upon the previous exposition, the marginal notes indicating the passages on which the exhortations are founded. Hortatory lectures are not perhaps as a rule either very pleasant or very instructive reading; and I am by no means sure that these lectures will be found an exception to the rule. I retain them simply because I hope that, despite their defects, they help to bring out the spirit and meaning of the Book.

Now in dealing with this broad and momentous department of human life, the Preacher exhibits the candour and temperance which marked his treatment of Wisdom and Mirth. Just as he would not suffer us to think of Wisdom as in itself an evil, nor of Pleasure as aught but the good gift of a good God ; so neither will he suffer us to think of Business as essentially and of necessity an evil. This, like those, may be abused to our hurt ; but none the less they may all be used, and were meant to be used, for our own and our neighbours' good. Pursued in the right method, from the right motive, with the due moderation and reserve, Business, as he is careful to point out, besides bringing other great advantages, may be a new bond of union and brotherhood : it develops intercourse among men and races of men, and should develop sympathy, good will, and a mutual helpfulness. Nevertheless, thrift may degenerate into miserliness, and the honest industry of content into a dishonest eagerness for undue gains, and a wise attention to business into an excessive devotion to business. These degenerate tendencies had struck their roots deep into the Hebrew mind of his day and brought forth many bitter fruits. The Preacher describes and denounces them ; he lays an axe to the very roots of these evil growths ; but it is only that he may clear a space for the fairer growths which sprang beside them, and of which these were the wild bastard offshoots.

Throughout this second Section of the Book, his subject

is Excessive Devotion to Business and the Correctives to it which his wisdom enabled him to suggest.

1. His handling of this Subject is very thorough and complete. Men of business could hardly do better than get these three Chapters and the lessons they teach by heart: they would find in them a "Manual of Conduct" happily adapted to their needs. According to the Preacher, their excessive devotion to affairs springs from "a jealous rivalry of the one with the other:" it tends to form in them a grasping covetous temper which can never be satisfied, to produce a materialistic scepticism of all that is noble and spiritual in Thought and Action, to render their worship formal and insincere, and, in general, to incapacitate them for any quiet happy enjoyment of their life. This is his diagnosis of their disease, or of that diseased tendency which, if it be for the most part latent in them, always threatens to become pronounced and to infect all healthy conditions of the soul.

(a) Let us glance once more at the several symptoms he has described, and consider whether or not they accord with the results of our observation and experience. Is it true, then—or, rather, is it not true, that an excessive devotion to business springs from the keen jealous rivalry which obtains among us? If, some two or three and twenty centuries ago, the Jews were bent every man on outdoing and outselling his neighbour; if his main ambition was to amass a greater wealth or to secure a larger

Devotion to Business  
springs from Jealous  
Competition;

Chap. IV., v. 1.

business than his competitor, or to make a handsomer show before the world ; if in the urgent pursuit of this ambition he held his neighbours not as neighbours but as unscrupulous rivals, keen for gain at his expense and to rise by his fall; if, to reach his end, he was willing to get up early and go late to rest, to force all his energies into an injurious activity and strain them close to the snapping-point :—if this were a fair likeness of the Jew of that time, might you not easily take it for a portrait of the average English trader? Is it not as accurate a delineation of his life as it could possibly be of any Hebrew form of life? If it be—and all the moralists of the age are agreed that our excessive devotion to Commerce, our intense faith in mere mercantile greatness, is sapping the nobler elements of our national life—we have great need to take the Preacher's warning. We greatly need to remember that the stream cannot rise above its source, nor the fruit be better than the root from which it grows; that the business ardour which has its origin in a base and selfish motive can only be a base and selfish ardour. When men gather grapes from thorns and figs from thistles, then, but not before, we may look to find a satisfying good in "all the toil and all the dexterity in toil" which spring from this "jealous rivalry of the one with the other."

(b) Nor, in the face of facts patent to the most cursory observer, can we deny that this eager and excessive devotion to the successful conduct of business tends to produce a

It tends to form a  
Covetous Temper ;

Chap. IV., v. 8.

grasping covetous temper, which, however much it has gained, is for ever seeking more. It is not only true that the stream cannot rise above its source : it is also true that the stream *will* run downwards, and must inevitably contract many pollutions from the lower levels on which it declines. The ardour which impels men to devote themselves with an eager intensity to the labours of the Market may often have an origin as pure as that of the stream which bubbles up on the summit of a mountain, amid the sweetest grass and tenderest ferns, and which runs tinkling along its clear rocky channels, setting its labour to a happy music, singing its low sweet song to the sweet listening air. But as it runs on, if it swell in volume and power, it also *sinks* and grows foul. Bent at first on acquiring the means to support a widowed mother or to cherish a wife very dear to him, to provide for his children, or to win an honourable place, or to promote some public end, the man of business too often suffers himself to become more and more absorbed in his traffic. He conceives larger schemes, is drawn into more perilous enterprises, and advances through these to fresh openings and opportunities, until at last, long after his original ends are compassed and forgotten, he finds himself possessed by the mere craving to extend his labours and resources, or the mere desire to amass—a craving which often “teareth” and tormenteth him, but which can be exorcised only by an exertion of spiritual force which would leave him half dead. “He has no one

with him, not even a son or a brother ; " the dear mother or wife is long since dead ; his children, to use his own detestable phrase, are " off his hands ; " the public good has slipped from his memory and aims : but still " there is no end to all his labours, neither are his eyes satisfied with riches." Coheleth speaks of one such man : alas, of how many such might we speak ?

To produce a Material-  
istic Scepticism ;

Chap. III., vv. 18—21.

(c) The "speculation" in the eyes of business men is not commonly of a philosophic cast, and therefore we do not look to find them arguing themselves into the blank materialism which infected the Hebrew Preacher as he contemplated them and their blind devotion to Traffic. They are far, perhaps very far, from thinking that in body and spirit, in origin and end, in faculty and prospect, man is no better than the beast—the creature of the same accident and subject to "the same chance." But though they do not reason out a conclusion so sombre and repugnant, do they not practically acquiesce in it ? If it is far from their thoughts, do they not *live* in its close neighbourhood ? Their mind, like the dyer's hand, is subdued to that it works in. Accustomed to think mainly of material interests, their character is materialized. They are disposed to weigh all things—truth, righteousness, the motives and aims of nobler men—in the gross scales of their merchandise, and can very hardly believe that they should attach much value to ought which will not lend itself to their coarse handling. In their judgment, mental ability, or the



graces of moral character, or single-hearted devotion to lofty ends, are not worthy to be compared with a full purse or large possessions. They regard as little better than a fool, of whom it is very kind of them to take a little care, a man who has thrown away what they call "his chances," in order that he may study wisdom or do good. Giving perhaps a cheerful and unforced accord to the current moral maxims and popular creed of the time, they permit neither to rule their conduct. If they do not say "Man is no better than a beast," they carry themselves as though he were little better, as though he had no instincts or interests above those of the thrifty ant, or the cunning beaver, or the military locust, or the insatiable leech—although they are both surprised and affronted when one is at the pains to translate their deeds into words. Judged by their deeds, they *are* sceptics and materialists, since they have no vital faith in that which is spiritual and unseen. They have found the "life of their hands," and they are content with it. Give them whatever furnishes the senses, and such of the intellectual capacities as hold by sense, and they will cheerfully let all else go. But such a materialism as this is far more injurious, far more likely to be fatal, than that which reflects and argues and utters itself in words. With them the malady has struck inward, and is beyond the reach of cure, save by the most searching and drastic remedies.



To make Worship  
Formal and Insincere:

Chap. V., vv. 1—7.

(*d.*) But now if, like Coheleth we follow these men to the Temple, what is the scene that meets our eye? In the English Temple, I fear, that which would first strike an unaccustomed observer would be the fact, that very few men of business are there. They are "conspicuous by their absence," or, at lowest, noted for an only occasional attendance. The Hebrew Temple was crowded with men—the women being relegated to some obscure nook: in the English Temple it is the other sex which predominates. But glance at the men who are there. Do you see no signs of weariness and perfunctoriness? Do you hear no vows which will never be paid, and which they do not intend to pay when they make them? no prayers which go beyond any candid and honest expression of their desires? Do you not feel that many of them are making an unwilling sacrifice to the decencies and proprieties instead of worshipping God and nerving themselves for the difficulties of obedience to the divine law? Listen: they are saying, "Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we bless Thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for Thine inestimable love in the redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory." But are these marvellous spiritual benefits "above all" else to them? Do they care for "the means of grace" as much even as they care for the state of the market, or for "the hope of glory" as much as for success in business? Which is most in their

thoughts, in their lives, in their aspirations, for which will they take most pains and make most sacrifices ;—for what *they* mean by the beautiful phrase “all the blessings of this life,” or for that sacred and crowning act of Divine Mercy, “the redemption” by which men are taught to trust the fatherly forgiving love of God ?

What is it that makes their worship formal and insincere ? It is the very cause which, as the Preacher tells us, produced the like evil effects among the Jews. They come into the Temple with pre-occupied hearts. Their thoughts are distracted by the cares of life even as they bow in worship. I do not know that I can better illustrate this point than by reminding you of an etching which appeared some years since, when the Sunday morning delivery of letters was first stopped in London. The scene was a church during morning service ; in one of the pews stood a man, the prayer-book slipping from his relaxed grasp, as with clouded wistful face, he said within himself, “Now I wonder whether Messrs. So-and-So protested that bill after all !” \* Who that saw it will ever forget the intense yet ludicrous misery of the man’s face, the air of anxious pre-occupation in his whole attitude, which detached him from the worshippers around him as obviously as if he had been fenced round with brass ? The whole business-world

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\* Though the print hangs clearly in my memory, I am afraid I cannot guarantee the accuracy of this citation.

of England sniggered over that marvellous print, not, let us hope, without some saving twinges of conscience. For it was true of so many, that almost every man felt that it came home to his experience; but true of so many that it was all the harder to appropriate its rebuke. And are there not thousands and tens of thousands in the great English Temple whose hearts are distracted by similar anxieties from the solemnities of worship? thousands and tens of thousands on whose lips the most sacred words are mere "idle talk," as remote from the true feeling of the moment as the "multitude of dreams" and vanities which haunt the night? who utter fervent prayers without any true sense of their meaning, or any hearty wish to have them granted, and to whom the whole order of service is but a round of forms to which they pay a customary and heartless deference?

And to take from Life  
its Quiet and Innocent  
Enjoyments.

Chap. V., v. 10—17.

(*c.*) Now surely a life so thick with perils, so beset with evil tendencies, should have a very large and certain reward to offer. But has it? For one, Coheleth thinks it has not. In his judgment, according to his experience, instead of making a man happier even in this present time, to which it limits his thoughts and aims, it robs him of all quiet and happy enjoyment of his life. And mark, it is not the unsuccessful man of business who might naturally feel sore and aggrieved, but the successful man of business, the man who has made a fortune and prospered in his schemes, whom the Preacher describes as having lost all

faculty of enjoying his gains. Even the man who has wealth and abundance so that his soul lacketh nothing of all he desireth, is placed before us as the slave of unsatisfied desire and constant apprehension. Both his hands are so full of labour that he cannot lay hold on quiet. Though he loves silver so well and has so much of it, he is not satisfied therewith; his riches yield him no certain and abiding delight. And how can he be in "happy plight" who is—

Debarr'd the benefit of rest?

When day's oppression is not eased by night,

But day by night, and night by day, oppress'd?

And each, though enemies to either's reign,

Do in consent shake hands to torture him.

The sound sleep of humble contented labour is denied him. He is haunted by perpetual apprehensions that some of his enterprises will prove unlucky, that "there is some ill a-brewing toward his rest," that evil in some shape will befall him. He doubts "the filching age will steal his treasure." He knows that when he is called hence, he can carry away nothing in his hand; all his gains must be left to his heir, who may either turn out a wanton fool or be crushed and degraded by the burden and temptations of a wealth for which he has not laboured. And hence, amid all his toils and gains, even the most successful and prosperous man suspects that he has been "labouring for the

wind" and may reap the whirlwind: he "is much perturbed and hath vexation and grief."

*Is the picture overdrawn? Is not the description as true to our modern experience as to that of "the antique world"? Shakespeare, who is our great English authority as to the facts of human experience, thought it quite as true. His Merchant of Venice has argosies on every sea; and two of his friends, hearing him confess that sadness makes such a want-wit of him that he has much ado to know himself, tell him that his "mind is tossing on the ocean" with his ships. They proceed to discuss the natural effects of having so many enterprises on hand. One says—*

Believe me, Sir, had I such venture forth,  
The better part of my affections would  
Be with my hopes abroad. I should be still  
Plucking the grass, to know where sits the wind;  
Peering in maps for ports, and piers, and roads;  
And every object that might make me fear  
Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt  
Would make me sad.

And the other adds—

My wind, cooling my broth,  
Would blow me to an ague, when I thought  
What harm a wind too great at sea might do.  
I should not see the sandy hour-glass run,  
But I should think of shallows and of flats,  
And see my wealthy Andrew dock'd in sand

Vailing her high-top lower than her ribs  
To kiss her burial. Should I go to church  
And see the holy edifice of stone,  
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,  
Which touching but my gentle vessel's side,  
Would scatter all her spices on the stream ;  
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks ;  
And, in a word, but even now worth this,  
And now worth nothing ? Shall I have the thought  
To think on this ; and shall I lack the thought,  
That such a thing bechanced would make me sad ?

“ Abundance suffereth not the rich to sleep ; ” the thought that his “ riches may perish in some unlucky enterprise ” sounds a perpetual alarum in his ears : “ all his days he eateth in darkness, and is much perturbed, and hath vexation and grief.” These are the words of the Hebrew Preacher : are not our own great poet's words an expressive commentary on them, an absolute confirmation of them, covering them point by point ? And shall we envy the wealthy merchant or manufacturer whose two hands are thus “ full of labour and vexation of spirit ” ? Is not “ the husbandman whose sleep is sweet, whether he eat little or much,” better off than he ? Nay, has not even the sluggard who, so long as he has meat to eat, foldeth his hands in quiet, a truer enjoyment of his life ?

Of course Coheleth does not mean to imply that every man of business degenerates into a miserly sceptic, whose worship is a formulated hypocrisy and whose life is vexed



with the saddening apprehensions of misfortune. No doubt there were then, as there are now, many men of business who were wise enough to "take pleasure in all their labours," to cast their burden of care on Him in whose care stand both to-morrow and to-day; men to whom worship was a holy strengthening communion with the Father of their spirits, and who advanced through toil to worthy or even noble ends. He means simply that these are the perils to which all men of business are exposed, perils into which they fall so soon as their devotion to business grows excessive. "Make business and success in business your chief good, your ruling aim, and you will come to think of your neighbours as selfish rivals; you will engender an appetite for gain which can never be sated; you will begin to look askance on all the lofty spiritual qualities which refuse to bow to the yoke of Mammon; your worship will degenerate into an organized hypocrisy; your life will be all vexed and saddened with fears which will strangle the very faculty of tranquil enjoyment:" this is the warning of the Preacher; a warning of which our generation, in such urgent sinful haste to be rich, stands in very special need.

2. But what checks, what correctives, what remedies would the Preacher have us apply to the diseased tendencies of the time? How shall men of business save themselves from that excessive devotion to its affairs which breeds so many portentous evils?



(a) Well, the very sense of the danger to which they are exposed—a danger so insidious, so profound, so fatal—should surely induce caution and a wary self-control. The symptoms of the disease are described that we may judge whether or not we are infected by it; its dreadful issues, that, if infected, we may study a cure. The man who loves riches is placed before us that we may learn what he is really like—that he is not the careless happy being we so often suppose him to be. We see him decline on the low base levels of covetousness and materialism, hypocrisy and perpetual apprehension; and, as we look, the Preacher turns upon us with, “There, *that* is the slave of Mammon in his habit as he lives. Do you care to be like that? Will you break your heart unless you are allowed to assume his heavy and degrading burden?”

This is one help to a wise content with our lot: but he has many more very much at our service; and notably this,—that an undue devotion to the toils of business is contrary to the will, the design, the providence of God. God, he argues, has fixed a time for every undertaking under heaven, and made all labours and undertakings beautiful each in its own time, but only then. By His wise kindly ordinances He has sought to divert us from an injurious excess in toil. Our sowing and our reaping, our time of rest and our time for work, the time to save and the time to spend, the time to seek and the time to lose,—all these, with all the fluctuations of feeling they excite

The Correctives of this Devotion are a Sense of its Perils;

Chap. V., vv. 10—17.

And the Conviction that it is opposed to the Will of God, as expressed in the Ordinances of His Providence,

Chap. III., vv. 1—8.

in us; in short, our whole life, from the cradle to the grave, is under, or should be under, law to Him. It is only when we violate His gracious ordinances,—working when we should be at rest, waking when we should sleep, saving when we should spend, weeping over losses which are real gains, or laughing over gains which will prove to be losses,—that we run into excess and break up the peaceful order and tranquil flow of the life which He designed for us.

In the Wrongs which  
He permits Men to  
inflict upon us;

Chap. III., v. 16.  
Chap. IV., vv. 1—3.

Because we will not be obsequious to the ordinances of His wisdom, He permits us to meet a new check in the caprice and injustice of man—making even these to praise Him by subserving our good. If we do not suffer the violent oppressions which drew “tears” from the Preacher’s fellow-captives, we nevertheless stand very much at the mercy of our neighbours in so far as our outward haps are concerned. Unwise human laws or an unjust administration of them, or the selfish rapacity of individual men—brokers who rig the market; bankers whose long prayers are a pretence under cloak of which they rob widows and orphans, and sometimes *make* them; bankrupts for whose wounds the Gazette has a singular power of healing, since they come out of it sounder and wealthier men than they went in: these are only some of the instruments by which the labours of the diligent are robbed of their due reward. And we are to take these checks as correctives, to find in the very losses which men inflict the gifts of a gracious

God. He permits us to suffer these and the like disasters lest our hearts should be overmuch set on getting gain. He graciously permits us to suffer them that, seeing how the wicked often thrive on the decay of the upright, we may learn that there is something better than wealth, more enduring, more satisfying, and may seek that higher good.

Nay, going to the very root of the matter and expounding its whole philosophy, the Preacher teaches us that wealth, however great and greatly used, *cannot* satisfy men: since God has "*put eternity into their hearts*" as well as time; and how should all the kingdoms of a world that must soon pass content those who are to live for ever? \* We may well call this world, for all so solid as it looks, "a perishing world;" for, like our own bodies, it is in a perpetual flux, perishing every moment that it may live a little longer, and must soon come to an end. But we, in our true selves, we who dwell inside the body and use its members as the workman uses his tools, how can we find a satisfying good, whether in the body or in the world which is akin to it and supplies it? *We* want a good as lasting

But, above all, in the  
immortal Cravings  
which He has  
quickened in the Soul.  
Chap. III., v. 11.

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\* M. de Lammenais—the founder of the most religious school of thinkers in modern France, from whom men such as Count Montalembert, Père Lacordaire, and Maurice de Guérin drew their earliest inspiration—asks, "Do you know what it is makes man the most suffering of all creatures?" and replies: "It is that he has one foot in the finite and the other in the infinite, and that he is torn asunder, not by four horses, as in the horrible old times, but between two worlds."

as ourselves. Nothing short of that can be our chief good, or inspire us with a true content.

Liko as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end ;  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend :

and we might as well think to build a stable habitation on the waves which break upon the pebbled shore, as to find an enduring good in the sequent minutes which carry us down the stream of time. It is only because we "do not understand" this "work of God" in putting eternity into our hearts ; because, plunged in the flesh and its cares or delights, we forget the grandeur of our nature, and are tempted to sell our immortal birthright for a mess of pottage which, however much we enjoy it to-day, will leave us hungry to-morrow : it is only, I say, because we are very far from understanding this work of God "from beginning to end," that we ever delude ourselves with the hope of finding in aught the earth yields a good in which we can rest.

Practical Maxims  
deduced from this View  
of the Business-life.

(*b.*) A noble philosophy this, and pregnant with practical counsels of great value ! For if, as we close our study of this Section of the Book, we ask, "What good advice does the Preacher offer that we can take and act upon ?" we shall find that he gives us at least three serviceable maxims.

To all men of business conscious of their special dangers and anxious to avoid them, he says, first: Replace the competition which springs from your jealous rivalry with the co-operation which is born of sympathy and breeds good will. "Two are better than one. Union is better than isolation. Conjoint labour has the greater reward." Instead of seeking to take advantage of your neighbours, try to help them. Instead of standing alone, associate with your fellows. Instead of aiming at selfish ends, pursue your ends in common. Indeed the wise Hebrew Preacher anticipates the Gospel to a quite remarkable degree, and in effect bids us love our neighbour as ourself, look on his things as well as on our own, and do to all men as we would that they should do to us.

A Maxim on  
Co-operation.

Chap. IV., vv. 9—16.

His second maxim is: Replace the formality of your worship with a reverent and steadfast sincerity. Keep your foot when you go to the House of God. Put obedience before sacrifice. Do not hurry on your mouth to the utterance of words which transcend the desires of your hearts. Do not come into the Temple with a pre-occupied spirit, a spirit distracted with thoughts that travel different ways. Realize the presence of the Great King, and speak to him with the reverence due to a king. Keep the vows you make in His house after you have left it. Seek and serve Him with all your hearts, and ye shall find rest to your souls.

A Maxim on Worship.

Chap. V., vv. 1—7.

A Maxim on Trust in  
God.

Chap. V., vv. 8—17.

And his last maxim is: Replace your grasping self-sufficiency with a constant holy trust in the fatherly providence of God. If you see oppression or suffer wrong, if your schemes are thwarted and your enterprises fail, you need not therefore lose the quiet repose and settled peace which come from a sense of duty done and the undisturbed possession of the main good of life. God is over all, and rules all the undertakings of men, giving each its due time and place, and causing all to work together for the good of the loving trustful heart. Trust in Him, and you shall feel, even though you cannot prove,

That every cloud that spreads above,  
And veileth love, itself is love.

Trust in Him, and you shall find that—

The slow sweet hours that bring us all things good,  
The slow sad hours that bring us all things ill  
And all good things from evil,

as they strike on the great horologe of Time, are set to a growing music by the hand of God; a music which rises and falls as we listen, but which nevertheless swells through all its saddest cadences and dying falls toward that jubilant harmonious close in which all discords will be drowned.



### THIRD SECTION.

*The Quest of the Chief Good in Wealth, and in the  
Golden Mean.*

*Chap. VI., VII., and VIII., vv. 1—15.*

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IN the foregoing Section Coheleth has shown that the Chief Good is not to be found in that excessive Devotion to the affairs of Business which was, and still is, characteristic of the Hebrew race. This devotion is commonly inspired either by the desire to amass great wealth, for the sake of the status, influence, and means of lavish enjoyment it is supposed to confer ; or by the desire to secure a competence, to stand in that golden mean of comfort which is darkened by no harassing fears of future penury or need. By a logical sequence of thought, therefore, the Preacher advances from his discussion of Devotion to Business, to consider the leading motives by which it is inspired. The questions he now asks and answers are, in effect, (1) Will wealth confer the good, the tranquil satisfaction, which all men seek ? And if not, (2) Will that moderate provision for the present and the future to which the more prudent restrict their aim ?



*The Quest in Wealth.*

## Chap. VI.

His discussion of the first of these questions, although very matterful, is comparatively brief: in part, perhaps, because in the previous Section he has already dwelt on many of the drawbacks which accompany wealth; and still more, probably, because, while there are but few men in any age to whom great wealth is possible, there would be unusually few in the company of exiles and captives for whose instruction he wrote. Brief and simple as the discussion is, however, we shall misunderstand it unless we remember that Coheleth is arguing, not against wealth, but against mistaking wealth for the Chief Good.

Indeed, the popular misconception of the whole Book of Ecclesiastes arises from the fact that its true aim is so often overlooked or forgotten. To many minds it appears one of the most melancholy books in the Sacred Canon; whereas it is really one of the most consolatory and cheerful. No doubt there is a tone of sadness in it, for it has to deal with some of the saddest facts of human life—with the errors which divert men from the true aim and the true good, and plunge them into a various and growing misery. But the voice which takes this saddened tone is the voice of a most brave and cheerful spirit—a spirit whose counsels can only depress us if we are seeking our chief good where we cannot find it. For the Preacher—as we have constant occasion to remember—does not condemn Wisdom or Mirth, Business or Wealth or Competence, as in themselves vanities. He approves of them; he shows us how we may so pursue,

and so use, them as to find them very pleasant and helpful to us; how we may so dispense with them, if they lie beyond our reach, as none the less to enjoy a very true and abiding content. His constant recurring moral is, that we *are* to enjoy our brief day, that God *meant* us to enjoy it; that we are to be up and doing with a heart for any strife or labour or pleasure, not to sit still and weep over broken illusions and defeated hopes. Our aims, our possessions—Wealth, Labour, Mirth, Wisdom—become vanities to us and vex our spirits only when we seek in them that supreme satisfaction which He, who has put eternity into our hearts, designed us to find only in Him. If we love Him and serve Him; if we acknowledge Him to be the Author of all our good gifts; if we seek first His kingdom and righteousness, this Book should have no sadness for us. We should find in it a confirmation of our most intimate convictions, and incentives to act upon them. But if we do not hold our wisdom, our pleasure, our traffic, our wealth, as His gifts and ordinances; if we permit them to usurp His seat and become as gods to us, then this Book will be sad enough for us, but no whit sadder than our lives. It will be sad, and will make us sad; yet only that it may lead us to repentance, and through repentance to a true and lasting joy. It is because this brave bright Book has been so generally misconceived that I have thought it well to interrupt my Exposition with these explanatory and corrective words.

The Man who makes  
Riches his Chief Good  
is haunted by Fears and  
Perplexities :

Chap. VI., vv. 1—6.

I. But now, to return to it. Let us observe that throughout this Sixth Chapter the Preacher is speaking of the Lover of Riches, not simply of the Rich Man ; not against Wealth, but against mistaking Wealth for the Chief Good. The man who trusts in riches is placed before us, and that we may see him at his best, he has the riches in which he trusts. God has given him his “good things,” given him them to the full. He lacks nothing that he desireth—nothing at least that wealth can command. Yet, because he does not accept his abundance as the gift of God, and hold the Giver better than His gift, he cannot enjoy it. But how do we know that he has suffered his riches to take an undue place in his regard ? We know it by this sure token—that he cannot leave God to take care of them and of him. He frets about them and about what will become of them when he is gone. He has no son, perchance, to inherit them, only some “stranger” whom he has adopted (v. 2)—and almost all childless Orientals adopt strangers to this day, as we find to our cost in India. This horror at the thought of being dead to name and fame and use through lack of heirs, was and is very prevalent in the East. Even Abraham, the father of the faithful, when God had promised him the supreme good, broke out with the cry, “What can’st Thou give me when I am going off childless, and have no heir but my body-servant Elieser of Damascus ?” Because this feeling lay close to the Oriental heart, the Preacher is at some pains to show what a

“vanity” it is. He argues: ‘Even if you should beget a hundred children instead of being childless; even though you should live twice a thousand years, and the grave did not wait for you instead of lying close before you; yet, so long as you were not content to leave your riches in the hand of God, you would fret and perplex yourself with fears. An abortion would be better off than you, although it cometh in nothingness and goeth in darkness, for it would know a rest denied to you, and sink without apprehension into “the place” from which all your apprehensions cannot save you (vv. 3—6). Foolish man! it is not because you lack an heir that you are perturbed in spirit. If you had one, you would find some other cause for anxious care, you would none the less be vexed with apprehensions; for you would still be thinking of your riches rather than of the God who gave them, and still dread the moment in which you must part with them instead of calmly referring them to His wise disposal.’”

From this plain practical argument Coheleth passes to an argument of more philosophic reach. “All the labour of this man is *for his mouth*,” that is to say, his wealth, with all that it commands, appeals to sense and appetite; it feeds “the lust of the eye, or the lust of the flesh, or the pride of life,” and therefore “his soul cannot be satisfied therewith” (v. 7). *That* craves a higher nutriment, a more enduring good. God has put eternity into it; and how can that which is immortal be contented with the lucky

For God has put Eternity into his Heart;

Chap. VI., vv. 7—10.

haps and comfortable conditions of time? Unless some immortal provision be made for the immortal spirit, it will pine, and protest, and crave till all power of happily enjoying outward good be lost. Nay, if the spirit in man be craving and unfed, whatever his outward conditions or his faculty for enjoying them, he cannot be at rest. The wise man may be able to extract from the gains of time a pleasure denied to the fool; and the poor man, his penury preventing him from indulging passion and appetite to satiety, may have a keener enjoyment of them than the magnate who has tried them to the full and grown weary of them. In a certain sense, as compared the one with the other, the poor man may thus have an "advantage" over the magnate and the wise man over the fool; for "it is better to enjoy the good we have than to crave a good beyond our reach;" and this much the poor man or the wise man may achieve. Yet, after all, what advantage have they? The thirst of the soul is still unslaked; no sensual or sensuous enjoyment can satisfy that. All human action and enjoyment is under law to God. No one is so wise or so strong as to contend successfully against Him or His ordinances. And it is He who has given men an immortal nature with cravings that wander through eternity; it is He who has ordained that they shall know no rest until they rest in Him (vv. 8—10).

Look once more at your means and possessions. Multiply them as you will; yet there are many reasons why,

And much that he  
gains only feeds  
Vanity:

Chap. VI., v. 11.

if you seek your chief good in them, they should prove vanity and breed vexation of spirit. One is, that beyond a certain point you cannot use or enjoy them. They add to your pomp. They enable you to fill a larger place in the world's eye. They swell and magnify the vain show in which you walk. But, after all, they add to your discomfort rather than your comfort. You have so much the more to manage, and look after, and take care of: but you yourself, instead of being better off than you were, have only taken a heavier task on your hands. And what advantage is there in that?

Another reason is, that it is hard, so hard as to be impossible, for you to know "what it is good" for you to have. That on which you have set your heart may prove to be an evil rather than a good when at last you get it. The fair fruit, so pleasant and desirable to the eye, that to possess it you were content to labour and deny yourself through years, may turn to an apple of Sodom in your mouth, and yield you, in place of sweet pulp and juice, only the bitter ashes of disappointment.

Neither can he tell  
what it will be Good for  
him to have,  
Chap. VI., v. 12.

And a third reason is, that the more you acquire the more you must dispose of when you are called away from this life: and who can tell what shall be after him? How are you so to dispose of your gains as that they shall do good and not harm, as that they shall carry comfort to the hearts of those whom you love, and not breed envy, alienation, and strife?

Nor foresee what will  
become of his Gains.  
Chap. VI. v. 12.



These are the Preacher's arguments against an undue love of riches, against making them so dear a good that we can neither enjoy them while we have them, nor trust them to the disposal of God when we must leave them behind us. Are they not sound arguments? Should we be saddened by them, or comforted? We can only be saddened by them if we love Wealth, or long for it, with an inordinate desire. If we can trust in God to give us all that it will be really good for us to have, the arguments of the Preacher are full of comfort and hope for us, whether we be rich or whether we be poor.

*The Quest in the  
Golden Mean.*

Chaps. VII. & VIII.,  
vv. 1—15.

There be many that say, "Who will show us any gold?" mistaking gold for their god or good. For though there can be but few in any age to whom great wealth is possible, there are many who crave it and believe that to have it is to possess the supreme felicity. It is not only the rich who "*trust* in riches." As a rule, perhaps, they trust in them less than the poor, since they have tried them and know pretty exactly both how much, and how little, they can do. It is those who have not tried them, and to whom poverty brings many undeniable hardships, who are most sorely tempted to trust in them as the sovereign remedy for the ills of life. So that the counsels of the Sixth Chapter may have a wider scope than we sometimes think they have. But whether they apply to few or many, there can be no doubt that the counsels of the Seventh and



Eighth Chapters are applicable to a large majority of men. For here the Preacher discusses the Golden Mean in which most of us would like to stand. Many of us dare not ask for great wealth lest it should prove a burden we could very hardly bear : but we have no scruple in adopting the prayer of Agur, " Give me neither poverty nor riches ; Feed me with food proportioned to my need ; Let me have a comfortable competence in which I shall be at an equal remove from the temptations of extreme wealth or of extreme penury." Now the endeavour to secure a competence may be, not lawful only, but most laudable ; since God means us to make the best of the capacities He has given us and the opportunities He sends us. Nevertheless, we may pursue this right end from a wrong motive, in a wrong spirit. Both spirit and motive are wrong if we pursue our competence as though it were a good so great that we can know no happy content and rest unless we attain it. For what is it that animates such a pursuit, save distrust in the Providence of God ? Left in his hands, we do not feel that we should be safe ; whereas if we had our fortune in our own hands, and were secured against chances and changes by a comfortable investment or two, we should feel safe enough. This feeling is, as you know, very general : we are all of us in danger of slipping into this form of unquiet distrust in the fatherly Providence of God.

The Method of the  
Man who seeks a  
Competence.

Chap. VII., vv. 1—14.

Because the feeling is both general and strong, the Hebrew Preacher addresses himself to it at some length. His object now is to place before us a man who does not aim at great affluence, but, guided by prudence and common sense, makes it his ruling aim to stand well with his neighbours and to lay by a moderate provision for future wants. The Preacher opens the discussion by stating the maxims or rules of conduct by which such a man would be apt to guide himself. One of his first aims would be to secure "a good name," since that would prepossess men in his favour, and open before him many avenues which would otherwise be closed.\* Just as one entering a crowded Oriental room with some choice fragrance exhaling from person and apparel would find bright faces turned towards him and a ready way opened for his approach, so the bearer of a good name would find many willing to meet him, and traffic with him, and trust him. As the years passed, his good name, if he kept it, would diffuse itself over a wider area with a more intense effect, so that the day of his death would be better than the day of his birth—to leave a good name being so much more honourable than to inherit one (chap. vii. v. 1). But how would he go about to acquire his good name? Again the answer carries us back to the East. Nothing is more striking to a

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\* "There are three crowns; of the law, the priesthood, and the kingship: but the crown of a good name is greater than them all."—THE TALMUD.

Western traveller than the serene dignified gravity of the superior Oriental races. In public they rarely smile, almost never laugh, and hardly ever express surprise. Cool, courteous, self-possessed, they bear good news or bad, prosperous or adverse fortune, with a proud equanimity. This equal mind, expressing itself in a grave dignified bearing, is with them well nigh indispensable to success in public life. And therefore our friend in quest of a good name betakes himself to the house of mourning rather than to the house of feasting; he holds that serious thought on the end of all men is better than the wanton foolish mirth which crackles like thorns under a kettle—making a great sputter but soon going out; and would rather have his heart bettered by the reproof of the wise than listen to the song of fools over the wine-cup (vv. 2—6.) Knowing that he cannot be much with fools without sharing their folly, fearing that they may lead him into those excesses in which the wisest mind is infatuated and the gentlest heart corrupted (v. 7), he elects rather to walk with a sad countenance, among the wise, to the house of mourning and meditation, than to hurry with fools to the banquet in which wine and song and laughter drown serious reflection and leave the heart worse than they found it. What though the wise reprove him when he errs? What though, as he listens to their reproof, his heart at times grow hot within him? The end of their reproof is better than the beginning (v. 8); as

he reflects upon it, he learns from it, profits by it, and by patient endurance of it wins a good from it which haughty resentment would have cast away. Unlike the fools, therefore, whose wanton mirth turns into bitter anger at the mere sound of reproof, he will not suffer his spirit to be hurried into a hot resentment, but will compel that which injures them to do him good (v. 9). Nor will he rail even at the fools who fleet the passing hour, or account that because they are so many or so bold, "the time is out of joint." He will show himself not only wiser than the foolish, but wiser than the wise: for while they—and here surely the Preacher hits the habit of most reflective men—laud the time when they were young, and ask, "How was it that former days were better than these?" he will conclude that the question springs rather from their querulousness than their wisdom, and make the best of the time and of the conditions of the time in which it has pleased God to place him (v. 10).

But if any ask, "Why has he renounced the pursuit of that wealth on which so many are bent who are less capable of using it than he?" the answer comes that he has discovered Wisdom to be as good as Wealth, and even better. Not only is Wisdom as secure a defence against the ills of life as Wealth, but it has this great advantage—that "it fortifies the heart," while wealth often lays a burden on the spirit which galls and frets it. Wisdom braces the spirit for any fortune, inspires an inward

serenity which does not lie at the mercy of outward accidents (vv. 11, 12). It teaches a man to regard all the conditions of life as ordained and shaped by God, and weans him from the vain endeavour, on which many exhaust their strength, to straighten that which God has made crooked (v. 13) : once let him see that the thing is crooked, that God meant it to be crooked, and he will accept and adapt himself to it instead of wearying himself with futile attempts to make it or to think it straight. And there is one very good reason why God should permit many crooks in our lot, very good reason therefore why a wise man should carry an equal mind through life. For God sends the crooked as well as the straight, adversity as well as prosperity, in order that we should know that He has "made this as well as that;" that we receive both from His benign hand. He interlaces His providences and veils His providences in order that, unable to foresee the future, we may learn to put our trust in Him rather than in any earthly good (v. 14). It therefore behoves a man whose heart has been bettered by much meditation and by the reproofs of the wise, to take both crooked and straight, both evil and good, from the hand of God, and to trust in Him whatever may befall.

So far, I think, we shall follow and assent to this theory of human life ; our sympathies will go with the man who seeks to acquire a good name, to grow wise, to stand in the Golden Mean. But when he proceeds to apply his theory,

The Perils to which it exposes him.

Chap. VII., v. 15, to Chap. VIII., v. 13.

to deduce practical rules from it, we can only give him a qualified assent, nay, must often altogether withhold our assent. The main conclusion he draws is, indeed, quite unobjectionable : it is, that in action, as well as in opinion, we should avoid excess, that we should keep the happy medium between intemperance and indifference.

But the very first moral he infers from this conclusion is open to the most serious objection. He has seen both the righteous die in his righteousness without receiving any reward from it, and the wicked live long in his wickedness to enjoy his ill-gotten gains. And from these two mysterious facts he infers, that a prudent man will neither be very righteous, since he will gain nothing by that, but will lose the friendship of those who are content with the current morality ; nor be very wicked since, though he may lose little by this so long as he lives, he will very surely hasten his death (vv. 16, 17). It is the part of prudence to lay hold on both ; to permit a temperate enjoyment of both virtue and vice, carrying neither to excess (v. 18). In this temperance there lies a strength greater than that of an army in a beleagured city ; for no righteous man is wholly righteous (vv. 19, 20) ; to aim at so lofty an ideal will be to attempt " to wind ourselves too high for sinful man below the sky : " we shall only fail if we make the attempt ; we shall be grievously disappointed if we expect other men to succeed where we have failed ; we shall lose faith in them and in ourselves we shall suffer

He is likely to compromise Conscience :

Chap. VII., vv. 15—20.



many pangs of shame and remorse and defeated hope : and therefore it is better at once to make up our minds that we are, and need be, no better than our neighbours ; that we are not to blame ourselves for customary and occasional slips ; that, if we are but moderate, we may lay one hand on righteousness and the other on wickedness. A most immoral moral, though it is as popular to-day as it ever was.

The second rule which this temperate Monitor infers from his general theory is, That we are not to be over-much troubled by what people say about us. Servants are adduced as an illustration, partly, no doubt, because they are commonly acquainted with their masters' faults, and partly because they do sometimes speak about them. "Let them speak," is his counsel, "and don't be too anxious to know what they say ; you may be sure that they will say of you pretty much what you often say of your neighbours or superiors ; if they depreciate you, you depreciate others, and you can hardly expect a more generous treatment than you give." Now if this moral stood alone, it would be both shrewd and wholesome. But it does not stand alone : and in its connection it means, I fear, that if we take the moderate course prescribed by prudence ; if we are righteous without being very righteous, and wicked without being very wicked, and our neighbours should begin to say, "He is hardly so good as he seems," or "I could tell a tale of him an if I would," we are

To be indifferent to  
Censure :

Chap. VII. vv. 21, 22.



not to be greatly moved by "any such ambiguous givings out:" we are not to be overmuch concerned that our neighbours have discovered our secret slips, since we have often discovered the like slips in them and know very well that "there is not on earth a righteous man who doeth good and sinneth not." In short, as we are not to be too hard on ourselves for an occasional and decorous indulgence in vice, so neither are we to be very much vexed by the censures which neighbours as guilty as ourselves pass on our conduct. Taken in this its connected sense, the moral is as immoral as that which preceded it.

Here, indeed, our prudent Monitor drops a hint that he himself is hardly content with a theory which leads to such results. He has tried this wisdom, but he is not altogether satisfied with it. He desired a higher wisdom—suspecting that there must be a nobler theory of life than this; but it was too far away for him to reach, too deep for him to fathom. After all his researches, that which was far off remained far off, deep remained deep: he could not find the better wisdom he sought (vv. 23, 24). And so he falls back on the wisdom he had tried, and draws a third moral lesson from it—which lesson, I confess, I find it somewhat difficult to handle.

To despise Women :

Chap. VII., vv. 25–29.

It is said of an English cynic that when any friend confessed himself in trouble and asked his advice, his first question was, "Who is she?"—taking it for granted that a woman must be at the bottom of the mischief. And the

Hebrew cynic appears to have been very much of his mind. He cannot but see that the best of men sin sometimes, that even the most temperate are hurried into excesses which their prudence condemns. And when he turns to discover what it is that bewitches them, he can find no other solution of the mystery than—Woman. Sweet and pleasant as she seems, she is “more bitter than death,” her heart is a snare, her hands are chains. He whom God loves will escape from her net after brief captivity; only the fool and the sinner are held fast in it (vv. 25, 26). Nor is this a hasty conclusion. Our Hebrew cynic has deliberately gone out with the lantern of his wisdom in his hand—surely a dark lantern!—to search for an honest man and an honest woman. He has been scrupulously careful in his search, “taking things,” *i.e.* indications of character, “one by one;” but though he has found one honest man in a thousand, he has never been so fortunate as to light on an honest and good woman (vv. 27-28). Was not the fault in the eyes of the seeker rather than in the faces into which he peered? Perhaps it was. It would be to-day and here; but was it there and on that far-distant yesterday? The Orientals would still say “No.” All through the East, from the hour in which Adam cast the blame of his transgression on Eve to the present hour, men have followed the example of their first father. Even St. Chrysostom, who should have known better, affirms that when the devil took from Job all that he had, he did not take his wife, “because he

thought she would greatly help him to conquer that saint of God." Mohammed sings in the same key with the Christian Father: he affirms that since the creation of the world there have been only four perfect women, though it a little redeems the cynicism of his speech that, of these four perfect women, one was his wife and another his daughter; for the good easy man may have meant a compliment to them rather than an insult to the sex. But if there be any truth in this estimate, if in the East the women were and are worse than the men, it is the men who have made them what they are. Robbed of their natural dignity and use as helpmeets, condemned to be mere toys, trained only to minister to sense, what wonder if they have fallen below their due place and honour? Of all cowardly cynicisms, that surely is the meanest which, denying women any chance of being good, condemns them for being bad. Our Hebrew cynic seems to have had some faint sense of his unfairness; for he concludes his tirade against the sex with the admission that "God made man upright"—the word "man" here, as in Genesis, standing for the whole race, male and female—and that if all women and nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of every thousand have become bad, it is because they have degraded themselves and one another by the evil "devices they have sought out" (v. 29).

And to be indifferent to  
Public Wrongs.  
Chap. VIII., vv. 1 -13.

The fourth and last rule inferred from this prudent moderate view of life is, That we are to submit with hope-

ful resignation to the wrongs which spring from human tyranny and injustice. Unclouded by gusts of passion, the wise temperate Oriental carries a "bright countenance" to the king's divan. Though the king should rate him with "evil words," he will remember his "oath of fealty," and not rise up in resentment, still less rush out in open revolt. He knows that the word of a king is potent; that it will be of no use to show a hot mutinous temper; that by a meek endurance of wrath he may allay it or avert it. He knows, too, that obedience and submission are not likely to provoke insult and contumely; and that if now and then he is exposed to an undeserved shame, any defence, and especially an angry defence, will but damage his cause (chap. viii. vv. 1—5). Moreover, a man who keeps himself cool and will not permit anger to blind him may, in the worst event, foresee that a time of retribution will surely come on the king or satrap who is habitually unjust; that the people will revolt from him and exact heavy penalties for the wrongs they have endured; that death, "that fell arrest without all bail," will carry him away. *He* can see that time of retribution drawing nigh, although the tyrant, fooled by impunity, is not aware of its approach: he can also see that when it comes it will be as a war in which no furlough is granted and whose disastrous close no craft can evade. All this execution of long-delayed justice he has seen again and again; and therefore he will not suffer his resentment to hurry him into dangerous

courses, but will calmly await the action of those social laws which compel every man to reap the due reward of his deeds (vv. 5—9).

Nevertheless, he has also seen times in which retribution did not overtake the oppressors; times even when, in the person of children as wicked and tyrannical as themselves, they "came again" to renew their injustice, and to blot out the very memory of the righteous from the earth (v. 10). And such times have no more disastrous result than this, that they undermine faith and subvert morality. Men see that no immediate sentence is given against the wicked, that they live long in their wickedness and beget children to perpetuate it; and the very faith of the good in the over-ruling providence of God is shaken and strained, while the vast majority of men set themselves to do the evil which flaunts its triumphs before their eyes (v. 11). None the less, the Preacher is quite sure that it is the part of wisdom to trust in the laws and look for the judgments of God; he is quite sure that the triumph of the wicked will soon pass, while that of the good will endure (vv. 12, 13): and therefore, as a man of prudent forecasting spirit, he will submit to injustice, but not inflict it, or at least not carry it to any dangerous excess.

Now this is by no means a noble or lofty view of human life; the line of conduct it prescribes is often, as we have seen, as immoral as it is ignoble: and we may feel some natural surprise at hearing counsels so base from the lips

The Preacher condemns this Theory of Human Life, and declares the Quest to be still unattained.

Chap. VIII.,  
vv. 14, 15.

of the inspired Hebrew Preacher. But we ought to know him and his method of instruction well enough by this time to be very sure that he is at least as sensible of their baseness as we can be ; that he is here speaking to us, not in his own person, but dramatically, and from the lips of the man who, that he may secure a good name and a comfortable position, is disposed to accommodate himself to the current maxims of his time and company. If we ever had any doubt on that point, it is set at rest by the closing verses of this Third Section of the Book. For in these the Preacher lowers his mask and tells us plainly that we cannot and must not rest in the theory he has just expounded, that to follow its counsels will lead us away from the Chief Good, not toward it. More than once he has already hinted to us that this wisdom is not the highest wisdom : and now he avows that he is as unsatisfied as ever, as far as ever from ending his Quest ; that his last key will not unlock the mysteries of life which have perplexed him from the first. He still holds, indeed, that it is better to be righteous than to be wicked ; though he now sees that even the prudently righteous often have a wage like that of the wicked, and that the prudently wicked often have a wage like that of the righteous (v. 14). This new theory of life, therefore, he confesses to be "a vanity" as great and deceptive as any of those he has hitherto tried. And as even yet it does suit his purpose to give us his true theory and announce his final conclusion, he falls back on the



conclusion we have so often heard, that the best thing a man can do is to eat and to drink, and to carry a clear enjoying temper through all the days and all the tasks which God giveth him under the sun (v. 15). How this familiar conclusion fits into his final conclusion, and is part of it, though not the whole, we shall see in our study of the next and last Section of the Book.

II.—If, as poet Milton sings,

To know  
That which before us lies in daily life  
Is the prime wisdom,

we are surely much indebted to the Hebrew Preacher. He at least does not “sit on a hill apart” discussing fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute, or any such lofty abstruse themes. He walks with us in the common round, to the daily task, and talks to us of that which lies before us in our daily life. Nor does he speak as one raised high above the folly and weakness by which we are constantly betrayed. He has trodden the very paths we tread. He shares our craving and has pursued our quest after “that which is good.” He has been misled by the illusions by which we are beguiled. And his chief aim is to save us from fruitless researches and defeated hopes by placing his experience at our command. He speaks therefore to our real need, and speaks with a cordial sympathy which makes his counsel very welcome.



\* We are so made that we can find no rest until we find a Supreme Good—a good which will satisfy all our faculties, all our passions, all our aspirations. For *that* we search with an unconquerable ardour; but our ardour is not always under law to wisdom. We often suppose that we have reached our Chief Good while it is still far off, or that at least we are looking for it in the right direction when in truth we have turned our back upon it. Sometimes we seek for it in wisdom, sometimes in pleasure, sometimes in fervent devotion to secular affairs; sometimes in love, sometimes in wealth, and sometimes in a modest yet competent provision for our future wants. And if, when we acquire our special good, we find that our hearts are still craving and restless, still hungering for a larger good, we are apt to think that if we had a little more of that which so far has disappointed us—if we were somewhat wiser, or our pleasures were more varied; if we had a little more love or a larger estate—all would be well with us and we should be at peace. Perhaps in time we get our “little more,” but still our hearts do not cry “Hold, enough!”—enough being always a little more than we have; till at last, weary and disappointed in our quest, we begin to despair of ourselves and distrust the kindness of God. “If God be good,” we ask, “why has He made us thus—always seeking yet never finding, urged on by imperious appetites which are never satisfied, impelled by hopes which for ever elude our grasp?” And because we cannot

answer the question, we cry out "Vanity of vanities! all is vanity and vexation of spirit!" "Ah, no," replies the kindly Preacher who has himself known this despairing distrust and surmounted it: "no, all is not vanity. There is a Chief Good, a satisfying good, although you have not found it yet; and you have not found it because you have not looked for it in the right direction. Once take the right path and you will find a Good which will make all else good to you, a Good which will lend a new value and a new sweetness to your wisdom and mirth, your labour and your gain." But men are very slow to believe that they have wasted their time and strength, that they have mistaken their path; they are reluctant to believe that a little more of that of which they have already acquired so much, and which they have always held to be best, will not yield them the satisfaction they seek. And therefore the wise Preacher, instead of telling us at once where the true Good is to be found, takes much pains to convince us that it is not to be found where we have been wont to seek it. He places before us a man of the largest wisdom, whose pleasures were exquisitely varied and combined, a man whose devotion to affairs was the most perfect and successful, a man of imperial nature and wealth, and whose heart had glowed with all the fervours of love: and this man, so rarely gifted and of such ample conditions, confesses that he could not find the Chief Good in any one of the directions in which we commonly seek it, although

he had travelled farther in every direction than we can hope to go. If we are of a rational temper, if we are open to argument and persuasion, if we are not resolved to buy our own experience at a heavy, perhaps a ruinous, cost, how can we but accept the wise Hebrew's counsel, and cease to look for the satisfying Good in quarters in which he assures us it is not to be found?

We have already considered the several stages of his argument as it bore on the men of his time. We have now to mark its application to our own age. As his custom is, the Preacher does not develop his argument in open logical sequence; he does not write a moral essay, but paints us a dramatic picture.

1. He depicts a man who trusts in riches, who honestly believes that wealth is the Chief Good, or, at lowest, the way to it. This man has laboured prudently and dexterously to acquire affluence; and he has acquired it. Like the rich man of the Parable, he has much goods, and barns that grow fuller as fast as they grow bigger. "God has given him riches and wealth and abundance, so that his soul"—not having learned how to look for anything higher—"lacks nothing of all that it desireth." He has reached his aim, then, acquired what he holds to be good. Can he not be content with it? No: for though he bids his soul make merry and be glad, it obstinately refuses to obey. It is darkened with perplexities, haunted by vague

*The Quest in Wealth.*

Chap. VI.

The Man who makes Riches his Chief Good is haunted by Fears and Perplexities.

Chap. VI., vv. 1—6.

longings, fretted and stung with perpetual care. Now that he has his riches, he goes in dread lest he should lose them; he is unable to decide how he may best employ them, or how to dispose of them when he will have to leave them. God has given them to him: but he does not admit that they are the gift of God; or, if he does, he cannot trust God with them. He has no doubt that God did very wisely in giving them to *him*; but he is not at all sure that God will show an equal wisdom in giving them to some one else when he is gone. And so the poor rich man sits steeped in wealth up to his chin—up to his chin, but not up to his lips, for he has no “power to enjoy” it. Burdened with jealous care, he grudges that others should share what he cannot enjoy, grudges above all that, when he is dead, another should possess what has been of so little comfort to him. “If thou art rich,” says Shakespeare,

thou art poor;  
For, like an ass whose back with ingots bows,  
Thou bearest thy heavy riches but a journey,  
And Death unloads thee.

But our rich man is not only like an ass; he is even more stupid than an ass: for the ass would not have his back bent even with golden ingots if he could help it, and is only too thankful when the burden is lifted from his back; while the rich man not only *will* plod on beneath his heavy load, but in his dread of being unladen at the

journey's end imposes on himself a burden heavier than all his ingots, and *will bear that* as well as his gold. He creeps along beneath his double load, and brays quite pitifully if you so much as put out a hand to ease him.

It is not of much use, perhaps, to argue with one so besotted : but lest we should slip into his degraded estate, the Preacher points out for our instruction the sources of his disquiet, and shows why it is impossible that he should know content. Among other sources of disquiet he notes three. (1.) That "there are many things which increase vanity:" that is to say, many of the acquisitions of the rich man only augment his pomp and outward state. Beyond a certain point he cannot possibly enjoy the good things he possesses ; he cannot, for instance, live in all his costly mansions at once, nor eat and drink all the sumptuous fare daily set on his table, nor carry his whole wardrobe on his back. He is hampered with superfluities which breed care but yield him no comfort. And as he grudges that others should enjoy them, all this abundance, all that goes beyond his personal gratification, so far from being an "advantage" to him, is only a burden and a torment. (2.) Another source of disquiet is, that no man, not even he, "can tell what is good for man in life," what will be really helpful and pleasant to him. Many things which attract desire pall upon the taste. And as "the day of our vain life is brief," gone "like a shadow," he may flit away before he has had a chance of using much that

Much that he gains  
only feeds Vanity.

Chap. VI. v. 11.

He cannot tell what it  
will be Good for him to  
have ;

Chap. VI. v. 12.

Nor foresee what will  
become of his Gains :

Chap. VI., v. 12.

he has laboriously acquired. (3.) And a third source of disquiet is, that the more a man has the more he must leave : and that is a fact which cuts him two ways, with a keen double edge. For the more he has the less he likes leaving it ; and the more he has the more is he puzzled how to leave it. He cannot tell " what shall be after him," and so he makes one will to-day and another to-morrow, and very likely dies intestate after all.

Is not that a true picture, a picture true to life ? Thackeray, our English Ecclesiast, tells us how one of our wealthiest peers once complained to him that he was never so happy and well-served as when he was a bachelor in chambers ; that his splendid mansion was a dreary solitude to him, and the long train of domestics his masters rather than his servants. More than once he depicts the man of immense fortune and estate as so occupied in learning and discharging the heavy duties of property, so tied and hampered by the thought of what was expected of his position, as to fret under a constant weight of care and to lose all the sweet uses of life. And have not we ourselves known men who have grown more penurious as they have grown richer, more unable to decide what it would be really good or even pleasant for them to do, more and more anxious as to how they should devise their abundance ? Even as I speak\* the Scotch papers are busy with the

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\* January, 1867.



story of a millionaire, the close of which is so dramatic as to touch the dullest imagination. This rich man was in the act of signing a cheque for £10,000 when he was struck with the paralysis from which he never recovered; and the cheque with its unfinished signature was found on his table after his death. For forty years, it is said, he had not been inside a place of worship, and had had scarcely any friendly intercourse with his kind. His chief pleasure seems to have consisted in adding to a fortune already immense, and to save a sixpence he would wrangle like a scold. Too grasping to enjoy his wealth, he was too shrewd to share the miser's meagre but intense passion. He used to say of himself, "I am a poor rich man, burdened with money; but I have nothing else." And when compelled to part with his burden, on his dying bed, he left more than half a million to a hundred persons who had known little or nothing of him while he lived; and nearly half a million more to the charities of the Church he never entered. *He* found that "there are many things which increase vanity;" that he could not decide "what it would be good" for him to do and have; and as he "could not tell what would be after him," he has left large bequests which in all probability will do as much harm as good. Grocers, masons, day-labourers, fish-hawkers, and the poor relatives whom he remembered only as he died, are now the richer for his death by many thousands; and, raised from poverty to sudden wealth, are only too likely



to travel in the direction which beggars set on horseback commonly take.

And because God has put Eternity into his Heart, he cannot be content with Temporal Good.

CHAP. VI. vv. 7—10.

But the Hebrew Preacher is not content to give us an accurate picture of the Rich Man and his perplexities—a picture as true to the life now as it was then. He also points out how it is that the lover of riches came to be the man he is, and why he can never lay hold on the Supreme Good. “All the labour of this man is for his mouth,” for the senses and for those faculties and affections which hold by sense; and therefore, however prosperous the issue to which his labours conduct, “yet his soul cannot be satisfied.” For the soul is not fed by that which feeds the sense. God has “put eternity” into it. It craves an eternal sustenance. It cannot rest until it gains access to “the living water,” and “the meat which endureth,” and the good “wine of the kingdom.” A beast—if indeed beasts have no souls, which I neither deny nor admit—may be content if only his outward conditions be comfortable; but a man, simply because he is a man, must have a happy inward life before he can be content. His thirst and hunger after righteousness must be satisfied. He must know that, when flesh and heart fail him, he will be received into an everlasting habitation. He must have a treasure which the moth cannot corrupt nor the thief filch from him. We cannot escape our nature if we would, any more than we can jump off of our shadow; and our very nature cries out for an immortal good. Hence it is that the

rich man who trusts in his riches, and not in the God who gave him riches, carries within him a hungry craving soul. Hence it is that all who trust in riches and hold them to be the Chief Good are restless and unsatisfied. For, as the Preacher reminds us, it is very true both that the rich man may not be a fool, and that the poor man may trust in riches just as heartily as the wealthiest magnate. By virtue of his wisdom, the wise rich man may so vary and combine the good things of this life as to win from them a gratification denied to the sot whose sordid heart is set on gold; and the poor man, because he has few of the enjoyments of wealth, may snatch at the few which come in his way with vivid eager delight. Both may "enjoy the good they have" rather than "crave a good beyond their reach:" but if they mistake that good for the Supreme Good, neither their poverty nor their wisdom will save them from the misery of disappointed hopes. For they too have souls—are souls; and the soul is not to be satisfied with that which goes in at the mouth. Wise or foolish, rich or poor, whosoever trusts in riches is either like the ass whose back is bent with a weight of gold, or he is worse than the ass and *longs* to take a burden on his back from which only Death can unlade him.

2. But now to come closer home, to draw nearer to that prime wisdom which consists in knowing that which before us lies in daily life, let us glance at the Man who aims to stand in the Golden Mean: the man who does not

*The Quest in the Golden Mean.*

Chap. VII, v. 1.

Chap. VIII, v. 15.

aspire to heap up a great fortune, but to secure a modest Competence. He is more on our own level. For our trust in riches is, for the most part, modified by other trusts. If we believe in Gold, we also believe in Wisdom and in Mirth; if we labour to provide for the future, we also wish to use and enjoy the present. We think it well that we should know something of the world about us, and take some pleasure in our life. We think that to put money in our purse should not be our only aim, though it should be a leading aim. We admit that "the love of money is a root of all evil"—one of the roots from which all forms and kinds of evil may blossom out: and to save ourselves from falling into that base lust, we limit our desires. We shall be content if we can put by a moderate sum, and we flatter ourselves that we desire even that not for its own sake, but for the means of knowledge or service or innocent enjoyment with which it will furnish us. "Nothing I should like better," says many a man, "than to retire from business so soon as I have enough to live upon and to devote myself to this branch of study or that province of art, or to take my share of public duties or give myself to a cheerful domestic life." It speaks well for our time, I think, that while in the larger cities of the Empire there are still many in haste to be rich and very rich, in hundreds of provincial towns there are thousands of men who feel that Wealth is not the Chief Good, and who do not care to wear the livery of Mammon till they

don the shroud. Nevertheless, though their aim be "most sweet and commendable," it has perils of its own—imminent and deadly perils which few of us altogether escape. And these perils are clearly set before us in the sketch of the Hebrew Preacher. As I reproduce that sketch, suffer me, for the sake of brevity, while carefully retaining the antique outlines, to fill in with modern details.

Suppose a young man to start in life, then, with this theory, this plan, this aim distinctly before him :—He is to be ruled by prudence and plain common sense. He will try to stand well with the world, and to make a moderate provision for future wants. This aim will beget a certain temperance of thought and action. He will permit himself no extravagances—no wandering out of bounds, and perhaps no enthusiasms, for he wants to establish "a good name," a good reputation, which shall go before him like "a sweet perfume" and dispose mens' hearts toward him. And therefore he carries a sober face, frequents the company of older wiser men, is grateful for any hints their experience may furnish, and takes even their reproofs with a good grace. He walks in the beaten paths, knowing the world to be impatient of novelties. The wanton mirth and crackling laughter of fools in the house of feasting are not for him: for he has set Mrs. Grundy always before his eyes, and his fear of her is very great. He is not to be seduced from the plain prudent course which he has marked out for himself whether by inward provocation or

The Method of the  
Man who seeks a  
Competence.

Chap. VII.,  
vv. 1—14.

outward allurements. If he is a young lawyer, he will write no poetry, attorneys having a horror of literary men. If he is a young doctor, Homœopathy, Hydropathy, and all new schemes of medicine will disclose their charms to him in vain. If he is a young clergyman, he will be conspicuous for his orthodoxy, and for his emphatic assent to all that the leaders of opinion in the Church think or may think. If he is a young merchant or manufacturer, he will be no breeder of costly patents and inventions, but will be among the first to profit by them when they are found to pay. If he is a young mechanic, he will join his Trade-Union, be regular with his subscription and punctual in his observance of its decisions. Whatever he may be, he will not be of those who try to make crooked things straight and rough places plain, and thus to accelerate the progress of man. He wants to get on : and the best way to get on is to keep the beaten path and push forward in that. And he will be patient—not throwing up his game because for a time the chances go against him, but waiting till the times mend and his chances improve. So far as he can, he will keep the middle of the stream, that, when the tide in men's affairs which leads on to fortune sets in, he may be of the first to take it at the flood and sail easily on to his desired haven.

In all this there may be no conscious insincerity, and very little that deserves censure. For all young men are not wise with the highest wisdom, nor original, nor brave with

the courage which follows Truth in scorn of consequence. And our young man may not be dowered with the love of loves, the hate of hates, the scorn of scorns. He may be of a nature essentially prudent and commonplace, or training and habit may have superinduced a second nature. To him a primrose may be a primrose and nothing more: his instinctive thought as he looks at it may be how he can reproduce its colour in some of his textures or extract a saleable perfume from its nectared cup: he may even think that primroses are a mistake, and that 'tis pity they were not pot-herbs; or he may think that he shall have plenty of time to gather primroses by-and-bye, but that for the present he must be content to pick pot-herbs for the market. In his way, he may even be a sincerely religious man; he may admit that both prosperity and adversity are of God, that we must take patiently whatever He may send; and he may heartily desire to be on good terms with Him who alone can "order all things as He please."

But here we light on his first grave peril: for he will carry his temperance into his religion, and he may subordinate even that to his desire to get on. Looking on men in their religious aspect, he sees that they are divided into two classes, the righteous and the wicked. As he considers them, he concludes that on the whole the righteous have the best of it, that godliness is real gain. But he soon discovers that this first rough conclusion needs to be carefully guarded. For, as he looks on men more closely, he

The Perils to which it exposes him.

Chap. VII., v. 15, to  
Chap. VIII., v. 13.

He is likely to compromise Conscience:

Chap. VII., vv. 15-20.



perceives that at times the righteous die in their righteousness without being the better for it, and the wicked live in their wickedness without being the worse for it. He perceives that, while the very wicked die before their time, the very righteous, those who are always reaching forth to that which is before and rising to new heights of insight and obedience, are "forsaken;" that they are left alone in the thinly-peopled solitude to which they have climbed, losing the sympathy even of those who once walked with them. Now, these are facts; and a prudent sensible man tries to accept facts, and to adjust himself to them, even when they are adverse to his wishes or conclusions. *He* does not want to be left alone, nor to die before his time. And therefore, taking these new facts into account, he infers that it will be best to be good without being very good, and wicked without being very wicked. Nay, he is disposed to believe that "whoso feareth God," studying the facts of His providence and drawing the logical inference from them, "will lay hold of both" wickedness and righteousness, and will blend them in that proportion which the Divine Providence seems to favour. But here Conscience protests, urging that evil can never be good. To pacify it, he adduces the notorious fact that "there is not a righteous man upon earth who doeth good, and sinneth not." "Conscience," he says, "you really are too strict and strait-laced, too hard upon a poor fellow who wants to do as well as he can. You go quite too far. How can you



expect me to be better than great saints and men after God's own heart?" And so, with a wronged and pious air, he turns to lay one hand on wickedness and another on righteousness—quite content to be no better than his neighbours and to let Conscience sulk herself into a sweeter mood.

Conscience being silenced, Prudence steps in. And Prudence says, "People will talk. They will take note of your slips and tattle about them. Unless you are very very careful, you will damage your reputation; and if you damage that, how can you hope to get on?" Now as the man is specially devoted to Prudence, and has found her kind mistress and useful monitress in one, he is at first a little staggered to find her taking part against him. But he soon recovers himself and replies, "Dear Prudence, you know as well as I do that people don't like a man to be better than themselves. Of course they will talk if they catch me tripping; but I do not mean to do more than trip, and a man who trips gains ground in recovering himself and goes all the faster for a while. Besides we all trip; some fall even. And I talk of my neighbours just as they talk of me; and we all like each other the better for being birds of one feather."

At this Prudence smiles, and stops her mouth. But being very willing to assist so quick-witted a disciple, she presently returns, and says, "Are not you rather a long while in securing your little Competence? Is there no

To be indifferent to  
Censure :

Chap. VII. vv. 21, 22.

To despise Women :

Chap. VII. vv. 25-29.

short cut to it? Why not take a wife with a small fortune of her own, or with connections who could help you on?" Now the man not being a bad man, but a man who would fain be good so far as he knows goodness, is somewhat taken aback by such a suggestion as this. He thinks Prudence must be growing very worldly and mercenary. He says within himself, "Surely *love* should be sacred! A man should not prostitute that in order that he may get on! If I marry a woman simply or mainly for her money, what worse degradation can I inflict on her or on myself? how shall I be better than those old Hebrews and Orientals who held women only as a toy or a convenience? To do that, would be to make a snare and a net of her—to degrade her from her true place, and possibly to think of her as even worse than I had made her." Nevertheless, his heart being very much set on securing a Competence, and an accident of the sort which he calls "providences" putting a foolish woman with a pocket-full of money in his way, he takes both the counsel of Prudence and a wife to match.

And to be indifferent to  
Public Wrongs.

Chap. VIII., vv. 1—13.

The world, we may be sure, thinks none the worse of him for that. Once more he has proved himself a man whose eye is steadfastly bent on "the main chance" and who knows how to seize occasions as they rise. But he who has thus profaned the inner sanctuary of his own soul, is not likely to be sensitive to the large claims of public duty. If he sees oppression, if the tyranny of a man or a

class rises to a height which calls for rebukeful opposition, he is not the man to sacrifice comfort and risk property that he may assail iniquity in her strong places. It is not such men as he who, when the times are out of joint, feel that they are born to set them right. Prudence is still his guide, and Prudence says, "Let things alone: they will right themselves in time. The social laws will avenge themselves, heaping retribution on the head of the oppressor and delivering the oppressed. You can do little to hasten their action. Why should you risk so much to gain so little?" And the man is content to sit still with folded hands when every hand that can strike a blow for right is wanted in the strife; and can even quote texts of Scripture to prove that in "quietness and confidence" in the action of the Divine Laws is the true "strength."

Now I make my appeal to those who daily enter the world of business: is not this the common tone of that world? are not these the very perils to which you lie open? How often have you heard men recount the slips of the righteous in order to justify themselves for not assuming to be righteous overmuch! How often have you heard them vindicate their own occasional errors by citing the errors of those who give greater heed to religion than they do! How often have you heard them congratulate a neighbour on having had the good luck to carry off an heiress, and speak of wedded love itself as a mere help to worldly advancement! How often have you heard them

The Preacher condemns this Theory of Human Life, and declares the Quest to be still unattained.

Chap. VIII. vv. 14, 15.


sneer at the nonsensical enthusiasm which has led certain men to throw away their chances in life, in order to devote themselves to the service of truth, or to lose popularity that they might lead a forlorn hope against customary wrongs, and thank God that no such maggot ever bit their brains? If, during the last twenty years, since I too "went on 'Change," the general tone has not risen a whole heaven, I know that you must daily hear such things as these, and worse things than these; and that not from irreligious men of bad character, but from men who take a fair place in our Christian congregations. From the time of the Wise Preacher to the present hour, this sort of talk has been going on, and the scheme of life from which it springs has been stoutly held. There is the more need, therefore, for you to study the Preacher's conclusion. For his conclusion is, that this scheme of life is wholly and irremediably bad, that it tends to make a man a coward and a slave, that it cannot satisfy the large desires of the soul, and that it cheats him of the Chief Good. His conclusion is, that the man who so sets his heart on gaining even a Competence that he cannot be content without it, has no genuine trust in God, since he is willing to give in to immoral maxims and customs, in order to secure that which he thinks will make him largely independent of the providence of God. The Preacher speaks as to wise men—men of some experience of the world. Judge you what he says.

## FOURTH SECTION.

*The Quest Achieved. The Chief Good is to be found, not in Wisdom nor in Pleasure, nor in Devotion to Affairs and its Rewards; but in a Wise Use and a wise Enjoyment of the Present Life, combined with a Steadfast Faith in the Life to Come.*

*Chap. VIII. v. 16, to Chap. XII. v. 7.*

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T last we approach the end of our Quest. The Preacher has found the Chief Good, and will show us where we may find it. But are we even yet prepared to welcome it and lay hold of it? Apparently he thinks not. For though he has already warned us that it is not to be found in Wealth or Industry, nor in Pleasure or Wisdom, he repeats his warning in this last Section of his Book, as though he still suspected us of hankering after our old errors. Not till he has again assured us that we shall miss our mark if we seek the supreme Good in any of the directions in which it is commonly sought, does he direct us to the sole path in

which we shall not seek in vain. Once more, therefore, let us gird up the loins of our minds to follow him along his several lines of thought, encouraged now by the assurance that the end of our journey is not far off.

The Chief Good not to  
be found in Wisdom :

Chap. VIII., v. 16, to  
Chap IX., v. 6.

I. The Preacher commences this Section by carefully defining his position and equipment as he starts on his last course. As yet he carries no lamp of Revelation in his hand, though he will not venture beyond a certain point without it. For the present he will trust to Reason and Experience, and mark the conclusions to which these conduct when unaided by any direct light from heaven. His first conclusion is, that Wisdom, which of all temporal goods still stands foremost with him, is incapable of yielding a true content. Much as it can do for man, it cannot solve the moral problems which daily task and afflict his heart, the problems which he must solve before he can be at peace. He may be so bent on solving these by Wisdom as to "see no sleep with his eyes by day or night;" he may rely on Wisdom with a confidence so genuine as to suppose at times that by its help he has "found out all the work of God"—really solved all the mysteries of the Divine Providence; but nevertheless "he has not found it out," the illusion will soon pass, and the unsolved mysteries reappear dark and sombre as of old (chap. viii. vv. 16, 17). And the proof that he has failed is, first, that he is as incompetent to foresee the future as those who are not so wise as he. With all his sagacity, he



cannot tell whether he shall meet "the love or the hatred" of his fellows. His lot is as closely hidden in "the hand of God" as theirs, although he may be as much better than they are as he is wiser (chap. ix. v. 1). A second proof is, that "the same fate" overtakes both the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked, and he is as unable to escape it as they are. Both die: and to men ignorant of the heavenly hope of the Gospel, the indiscrimination of Death seems the most cruel and hopeless of wrongs. The Preacher, indeed, is not ignorant of that bright hope; but as yet, as I have reminded you, he has not taken the lamp of Revelation into his hand: he is simply speaking the thought of those who have no higher guide than Reason, no brighter light than Reflection. And to these, their wisdom having taught them that to do right is infinitely better than to do wrong, no fact was so monstrous and inscrutable as that their lives should run to the same disastrous close with the lives of evil and violent men, that all alike should come into the power of "that churl Death." As they revolved this fact, their hearts grew hot with a fierce resentment as natural as it was impotent, a resentment all the hotter because they felt how impotent it was. Therefore the Preacher dwells on this fact, lingers over his description of it, adding touch to touch. "One fate comes to all," he says; "to the righteous and to the wicked, to the pure and to the impure, to the religious and to the irreligious, to the profane and to the



reverent." If death be a good, the maddest fool and the vilest reprobate share it with the sage and the saint. If death be an evil, it is inflicted on the good as well as the bad. None is exempt. Of all wrongs this is the greatest; of all problems this is the most insoluble. Nor is there any doubt as to the nature of Death. To him for whom there shines no light of hope beyond the darkness of the grave, death is the supreme evil. For to the living, however deject and wretched, there is still some hope that times may mend: even though in outward condition despicable as that unclean outcast—a dog, the homeless scavenger of Eastern cities, he has some advantage over the royal lion who, once couched on a throne, now lies in the dust rotting to dust. The living know at least that they must die; but the dead know not anything. The living can recall the past, and their memory harps fondly on notes which once were very sweet to them; but the very memory of the dead has perished, no music of the happy past can revive on their dulled sense. With their memory, love, hatred, and zeal, "the triad in which all human passions are comprised," have also become extinct. The heavens are fair; the earth is beautiful and generous; the works of men are many and diverse and great: but they have "no more any portion for ever in aught that is done under the sun" (vv. 2—6).

This is the Preacher's description of the hapless estate of the dead. His words would go straight home to the

hearts of the captives for whom he wrote, with a force even beyond that which they would have had for heathen races. In their Captivity, they had renounced the worship of idols. They had renewed their covenant with Jehovah. Many of them were devoutly attached to the ordinances and commandments which they and their fathers had neglected in the Holy Land. Yet their lives were made bitter to them with cruel bondage, and they had as little hope in their death as the very Persians who embittered their lives. It was in this sore strait, and under the strong compulsions of this dreadful extremity, that the more pious and studious of their Rabbis, like the Preacher himself, drew into an expressive context the passages scattered through their Sacred Books which hinted at a retributive life beyond the tomb, and settled into that strong conviction of the immortality of the soul which, as a rule, they never henceforth altogether let go. But when the Preacher wrote, this settled and general conviction had not been reached. There were many among them who, as their thoughts circled round the mystery of death, could only cry, "Is this *the end*? is *this* the end?" To the great majority of them, ignorant, and brutalized by the severities of bondage, it seemed the end. And even the few learned, who sought an answer to the question by blending the Greek and Oriental with the Hebrew Wisdom, attained no clear answer to it. To mere human wisdom, Life remained a mystery, and Death a mystery still more cruel and in-

scrutable. Only those who listened to the Preachers and Prophets whom God taught beheld the dawn which already began to glimmer on the darkness in which men sat.

Nor in Pleasure :

Chap. IX., vv. 7—12.

Now suppose a reflective Jew brought to the bitter pass which Coheleth has described. He has acquainted himself with wisdom, native and foreign ; and wisdom has led him to conclusions of virtue. Nor is he of those who love virtue as they love music—without practising it. Believing that a righteous and religious life will ensure happiness and equip him to encounter the difficulties of thought, he has striven to be good and pure, to offer his sacrifices and pay his vows. But he has found that, despite his best endeavours, his life is not a happy one, that the very calamities which overtake the wicked overtake him, that that wise carriage of himself by which he thought to win love has provoked hatred, that Death remains a frowning and inhospitable mystery. He hates death, and has no great love for the life which hitherto has brought him only labour and disappointment. Where is he likely to turn next ? Wisdom having failed him, to what will he apply ? At what conclusion will he naturally arrive ? Will not his conclusion be that standing conclusion of the baffled and hapless, “ Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die ? ” Will he not say, “ Why should I weary myself any more with studies which yield no certain science and self-denials which meet with no reward ? If a wise and pure conduct cannot secure me from the evils I dread, let me at least try

to forget them and grasp such poor delights as are still within my reach"? This, at all events, is the conclusion in which Coheleth lands him: and hence the Preacher takes occasion to review the pretensions of Pleasure or Mirth. To the baffled and hopeless devotee of Wisdom, he says, "Go, then, eat thy bread with gladness, and drink thy wine with a cheerful heart. Don't trouble yourself with any thought of God and His judgments. Why should you? He, as you have discovered, does not mete out rewards and punishments according to our merit or demerit; and as He does not punish the wicked after their deserts, you may be very certain that He has long since been pleased with your wise virtuous endeavours and will keep no score against you. Deck yourself, then, in white festive garments; let no perfume be lacking to your head; add to your harem any woman who takes your fancy: and as the day of your life is but brief at the best, let no hour of it slip by unenjoyed. As you have chosen Mirth for your portion, be as merry as you may. Whatever you can get, get; whatever you can do, do. You are on your road to the dark dismal grave where there is no work nor device; there is the more reason therefore why your journey should be a merry one" (vv. 7—10).

Thus the Preacher describes the Man of Pleasure and the maxims by which he rules his life: how true the description is I need not tarry to prove; 'tis a point every man can judge for himself. Judge also whether the

warning which the Preacher subjoins be not equally true to experience (vv. 11, 12). For, after having described the Man who trusts in Wisdom, and the Man who gives himself to Pleasure, he proceeds to show that even the Wise Man who blends mirth with study, whose wisdom therefore preserves him from the disgusts of satiety and vulgar lust, is nevertheless, to say nothing of the Chief Good, very far from having reached a certain good. *Then*, at least, "the race was not to the swift nor the battle to the strong; neither was bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the learned." Those who had the fairest chances had not always the happiest success; nor did those who bent themselves most strongly toward their ends always reach their ends. Those who were wanton as birds, or heedless as fish, were often taken in the snare of calamity or swept up by the net of misfortune. At any moment a killing frost might blight all the growths of Wisdom and destroy all the sweet fruits of Pleasure: and if they had only these—what could they do but starve when these were gone? The good which was at the mercy of Accident, which might vanish before the instant touch of Disease, or Loss, or Pain, was not worthy to be compared with the Chief Good, which is a good for all times, in all accidents, and renders him who has it equal to all events.

Nor in Devotion to Affairs and its Rewards:

Chap. IX., v. 13, to  
Chap. X., v. 20.

So far, then, Coheleth has been occupied in retracing the argument of the First Section of the Book, in which he had discussed the claims of Wisdom and Pleasure, or both

combined, to be regarded as the Chief Good of Life. Now he returns upon the Second and Third Sections of the Book : he deals with the man who plunges into public affairs, who turns his wisdom to practical account, and seeks to attain a Competence, if not a Fortune. He lingers long over this stage of his argument, probably because the Jews, then as always since, even in exile and under the most cruel oppressions, were a singularly pushing, practical, money-getting race : and as he slowly pursues it, he drops many hints of the social and political conditions of the time. Two features of it he takes much to heart : first that wisdom, even of the most practised and sagacious sort, did not win its fair recognition and reward,—a very natural complaint in so wise a man : and secondly, that his people were captives to tyrants so gross, so self-indulgent, so unstatesman-like as the Persians of his day,—also a natural complaint in a man of so wise and patriotic a spirit.

He opens with an anecdote in proof of the slight regard in which the most valuable and remunerative sagacity was held. He tells us of a poor man—and I have sometimes thought that this poor man may have been the Author himself ; for the military leaders of the Jews, though among the most expert strategists of that era, were often very learned studious men—who lived in a little city, with few inhabitants. A great king came up against the city, besieged it, threw up the lofty military causeway from which



it was the fashion of the time to deliver the assault. By his wit the poor man hit on a stratagem which saved the city; but though his service was so signal and the city so little that the "few men in it" must have seen him every day, "yet no one remembered that same poor man," or lent a hand to lift him from his poverty. Wise as he was, his wisdom did not bring him bread, nor riches, nor favour (vv. 13—15).<sup>\*</sup> Therefore, concludes the Preacher, wisdom, great gift though it be, and better, as in this instance, than "an army to a beleagured city," is not of itself sufficient to secure success.<sup>†</sup> A poor man's wisdom is despised even by those who profit by it. Although his counsel is often more valuable and welcome than the loud behests of a foolish ruler or captain, nevertheless the captain, because he is foolish, may be affronted to find one of the poorest men in the place wiser than himself; he may easily place his "merit in the eye of scorn," and so rob him of both the honour and the reward of his achievement;—an ancient saw not, I think, without modern instances (vv. 16, 17). For the fool is a great power in the world, especially the fool who is wise in his own conceit. Insignificant in himself, wellnigh a negative quantity, he may nevertheless do great positive harm and "destroy much good." Just as a tiny fly, when it is dead, may make the sweetest ointment offensive by infusing its own evil savour; so a man, when

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<sup>\*</sup> Comp. v. 11.<sup>†</sup> See Chap. vii., v. 19.



his wit is gone, may with his little folly cause many sensible well-meaning men to distrust the wisdom they should honour (chap. x., v. 1). To a wise man, like Coheleth, the fool, the presumptuous conceited fool, is "rank and smells to heaven," infecting sweeter natures with a most poisonous corruption. He paints us a picture of him—paints it with a graphic contempt which, if the eyes of the fool\* were in his head, and "what he is pleased to call his mind" could for a moment only shift from his left hand to his right (v. 2), might make him nearly as loathsome to himself as he is to others. As you read the verse (v. 3) the unhappy wretch stands before you. You see him coming out of his house; he goes dawdling down the street, for ever wandering from the path, attracted by the merest trifle, staring at familiar objects with eyes that have no recognition in them, knowing neither himself nor others; and, with pointed finger, chuckles after every sober citizen he meets, "There goes a fool!"

Yet a fool quite as foolish and malignant as this, quite as indecent even in outward behaviour, may be lifted to high place, and has ere now sat on an imperial throne.† The Preacher had seen many of them suddenly raised to

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\* Comp. Chap. ii., v. 14.

† To cite only one instance out of many—other instances may be found in the Introduction—let the reader recall the Emperor Caligula, and refer, for example, to his reception of the Alexandrian Jews, as recorded by Philo, *Legat ad Caium*, cc. 44—45; or by Merivale, in his History of the Romans,

power, while nobles were degraded and high functionaries of State reduced to an abject servitude. Now if the poor wise man should have to attend the durbar, or sit in the divan, of a foolish capricious despot, how should he bear himself? The Preacher counsels meekness and submission. He is to sit unruffled even though the ruler should rate him, lest by resentment he should provoke some graver outrage (vv. 4—7).<sup>\*</sup> To strengthen him in his submission, the Preacher hints at cautions and consolatory hopes which, because free open speech was very dangerous under the Persian despotism, he wraps up in obscure maxims capable of a double sense—to the true sense of which “a foolish ruler” was by no means likely to penetrate, even if the MS. fell into his hands.

The first of these maxims is, “He who diggeth a pit shall fall into it” (verse 8). And the allusion is, of course, to an Eastern mode of trapping wild beasts and game. The huntsman dug a pit, covered it with twigs and sods, and strewed the surface with bait; but as he dug many such pits and some of them were long without a tenant, he might at any inadvertent moment fall into one of them himself. The proverb is capable of at least two interpre-

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Chap. xlvii., pp. 47—50; or by Milman, in his *History of the Jews*, Book XII., pp. 141—145. He will then know, to use the phrase of Appollonius of Tyana, “what the kind of beast called a tyrant” is, or may be.

<sup>\*</sup> Comp. Chap. viii., v. 3.

tations. It may mean, that the foolish despot plotting the ruin of his wise servant might in his anger go too far; and, betraying his intention, provoke a retaliative anger before which he himself would fall. Or it may mean, that should the wise man seek to undermine the throne of the despot, he might be taken in his treachery and bring on himself the whole weight of the tyrant's wrath. The second maxim is, "Whoso breaketh down a wall a serpent shall bite him" (verse 8); and here the allusion is to the fact that snakes infest the crannies of old walls.\* To set about dethroning a tyrant was like pulling down such a wall; you would break up the nest of many a reptile, many a venomous hanger-on, and might only get bit for your pains. Or, again, in pulling out the stones of an old wall, you might let one of them fall on your foot; and in hacking out its timbers, you might cut yourself: that is to say, even if your conspiracy did not involve you in absolute ruin, it would be only too likely to do you serious and lasting injury (v. 9). The fifth adage runs (v. 10), "If the axe be blunt, and he do not sharpen it, he must put on more strength, but wisdom should teach him to repair it," and is, perhaps, the most difficult passage in the Book. The Hebrew is read in a different way by almost every translator. As I read it, it means, in general, that it is not well

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\* Comp. Amos v. 19.

to work with blunt tools when by a little labour and delay you may whet them to a keener edge. Read thus, the political rule implied in it is, "Don't attempt any great enterprise till you have a well-thought-out scheme, and skilful instruments to carry out every part of it." But the special political import of it may be, "Your strength is nothing to that of the tyrant; do not therefore lift a blunt axe against the trunk of despotism; wait till you have put a sharp edge upon it." Or, the tyrant himself may be the blunt axe, and then the warning is, "Sharpen *him* up; repair him; use him and his caprices to serve your own turn; get your way by giving way to him, and by skilfully availing yourself of his varying moods." Which of these may be the meaning of this obscure disputed passage, I do not undertake to say; perhaps neither of them, perhaps both. But the latter of the two seems to be sustained by the next adage, "If the serpent bite because it is not charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer." For here, I think, there can be little doubt that the foolish angry ruler is the serpent, and the wise functionary the charmer who is to extract the venom of his anger. Let the foolish ruler be never so furious, the poor wise man, who is able "to cull the plots of best advantages" and to save a city, can surely devise a charm of soft submissive words which will turn away his wrath; just as the serpent-charmer of the East, by song and incantation, is at least reputed to draw serpents from their lurk that he may pluck the venom

from their tongue (v. 11). For, as we are told, in the very next verse (v. 12), "the words of the wise man's mouth win him favour, while the lips of the fool destroy him."

And on this hint, on this casual mention of his name, the Preacher—who all this while, remember, is personating the sagacious man of the world bent on rising to wealth and comfort and distinction—once more "comes down" on the fool. He speaks of him with extreme wrath and contempt, as men versed in public affairs are apt to do, since they best know how much harm a talkative self-conceited fool may do them, how much good he may prevent. Here, then, is the fool of public life. He is a man always prating and predicting, although his words are folly and madness from beginning to end, and although he of all men is least able to give good counsel or to foresee what is about to come to pass. Puffed up by the conceit of wisdom and ability, he is for ever intermeddling with great affairs, though he has no notion how to handle them, and is barely capable of finding his way along the beaten road which leads to the capital city (vv. 12—15). If he would only hold his tongue, he might pass muster; beguiled by his gravity and silence, men might give him credit for sagacity and fit his foolish deeds with profound motives; but he *will* speak, and his words betray and destroy him. Of course *we* have no such fools to rise in their high place and wag their tongues to their own hurt; no doubt they are peculiar to the East.

But *then* there were so many of them, and their influence in the State was so disastrous that, as the Preacher thinks of them, he breaks into an almost dithyrambic fervour. He cries, "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is childish, and thy princes feast in the morning! Happy thou, O land, when thy king is noble, and thy princes eat at due hours, for strength and not for revelry!" Through the sloth and dissipation of these foolish rulers, the whole fabric of the State was fast falling into decay;—the roof rotting and the rain leaking in. To support their untimely profligate revelry, they imposed crushing taxes on the people, which inspired either a revolutionary discontent or the apathy of despair. The Wise Captive foresaw that the end of a despotism so luxurious and cruel could not be far off; that when the storm rose and the wind blew, the ancient house, unrepaired in its decay, would topple on the heads of those who sat in its halls revelling in a wicked mirth (vv. 16—19). Meantime, the sagacious servant of the State, perchance an exile from his own land, unable to arrest the progress of decay, or not caring how soon it was consummated, would make his "market of the time;" he would carry himself with dexterous caution; and, because the whole land was infested with the spies bred by despotism, he would give them no hold on him, nor so much as speak the simple truth of his foolish debauched rulers in the privacy of his bedchamber, or mutter his thoughts upon his own roof, lest some "bird of the air should carry the report" (v. 20).



But if this were the condition of the time, if to rise in public life involved so many mean crafts and submissions, so many deadly perils from spies and fools and despots; how could any man hope to find the Chief Good in it? Wisdom did not always win promotion: virtue was incompatible with success. The anger of an incapable idiot, or the whisper of an envious rival, or the caprice of a merciless despot might at any moment undo the work of years, and expose the most sagacious to the worst extremities of misfortune. There was no tranquillity, no freedom, no security, no dignity in a life such as this. Till this were resigned and some nobler aim found, there was no prospect of securing that great satisfying Good which lifts man above all accidents, and fixes him in a happy security from which no blow of Circumstance can dislodge him.

II. What that Good is, and where it may be found, the Preacher now proceeds to show. But as his manner is, he does not say in so many words, "This is the Chief Good of man," or, "You will find it yonder;" but he places before us the man who is walking in the right path and drawing closer and closer to it. Even of him the Preacher does not give us any formal and direct description; but, following what we have seen to be his favourite method, he gives us a string of maxims and counsels from which we are to infer what manner of man he is who happily achieves this great Quest.

But in a wise Use and  
wise Enjoyment of the  
Present Life,

Chap. XI., vv. 1—8.



And at the very outset we learn that this happy person is of a noble, unselfish, generous temper. Unlike the man who wants simply to get on and make a fortune, he grudges no man his gains; he looks on his neighbours' interests as well as his own, and does good even to the evil and the unthankful.\* He is one who "casts his bread upon the waters" (chap. xi., v. 1), and who "gives a portion thereof to seven, and even to eight" (v. 2). The familiar proverb of the first verse has been commonly read as an allusion to the sowing of rice and other grain from a boat during the periodical inundation of certain Eastern rivers, especially the Nile. We have been taught to regard the husbandman pushing from the embanked village in his frail bark, to cast the grain he would gladly eat on the

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\* One of the most elaborate proverbs in the Talmud is on Charity:—"Iron breaks the stone, fire melts iron, water extinguishes fire, the clouds drink up the water, a storm drives away the clouds, man withstands the storm, fear unmans man, wine dispels fear, sleep drives away wine, and death sweeps all away—even sleep. But Solomon the Wise says: charity saves from death." And there is hardly a finer passage in Shakespeare's Sonnets than that (CXVI.) in which he sings the disinterestedness of love, and its superiority to all change:

Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.

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Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

surface of the flood, as a type of Christian labour and charity. He denies himself; so also must we if we would do good. He has faith in the divine laws, and trusts to receive his own again with usury, to reap a larger crop the longer he waits for it; and, in like manner, we are to trust in the divine laws which bring us a hundredfold for every act of self-denying service and bless our "long patience" with the ampler harvest. It is with some natural regret that I ask you to give up that familiar figure, or rather not to derive it from this passage. The Hebrew *usus loquendi* does not admit of the usual interpretation. But it suggests a figure which, if unfamiliar, is not without its beauty. In the East, bread is commonly made in thin flat cakes, something like the slight Passover cakes of the Jews: and one of these cakes flung on the stream, though it would float with the current for a time, would soon sink; and, once sunk, would—unlike the grain cast from the boat—yield no return. And our charity should be like that. We should do good "hoping for nothing again." We should show kindnesses which will soon be forgotten and never be returned, and be undismayed by the thanklessness of our task. The task is not so thankless as it seems. For, first, we shall "find the good of it" in the loftier more generous temper which the habit of doing good breeds and confirms. If no one else be the better for our kindness, we shall be the better for

having shown it. The quality of charity, like that of mercy, is not strained:

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath ; it is twice blessed ;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

And, again, the task is not so thankless as it sometimes seems : for though many of our kind deeds may quicken no kindness in "him that takes," yet some of them will ; and the more we help and succour the more likely are we to light upon at least a few who, when our need comes, will succour and console us. Even the most hardened persons have a certain tenderness for those who help them, if only the help meet a real need and be rendered kindly and with a grace. And therefore we may be very sure that if we give a portion of our bread to seven and even to eight, especially if they know that we ourselves have stomach for it all, at least one or two of them will share with us when our need comes.

But is not this, after all, only a refined selfishness ? If we give because we do not know how soon we may need a gift, and in order that we may by-and-by "find the good of it,"—do not even the heathen and the publicans the same ? Well, not many of them, I think. I have not observed that it is their habit to cast their bread on thankless waters. If they forbode calamity and loss, they provide against them, not by giving, but by storing and

saving : they bank with Thrift and Good Investment, not with Charity and Kindness. The refined selfishness of showing kindness and doing good even to the evil and unthankful is by no means too common yet ; we need not go in dread of it. Nor is it an altogether unworthy motive. St. Paul\* urges us to help a brother who has fallen before temptation on the express ground that we ourselves may need similar help some day : and *he* was not in the habit of appealing to mean and base motives. Nay, the very Golden Rule itself touches this spring of action ; for among other meanings it surely has this, that we are to do to others as we would that they should do to us, in the hope that, sooner or later, they also will walk by the same rule, and do to us as we have done to them. There are other higher meanings in the Rule, as there are other purer motives for Charity : but I don't know that we are any of us of so lofty a virtue that we may need fear to show kindness in order that we may win kindness, or to give help that we may get help. Possibly, to act on this motive may be the best and nearest way to rise to such higher motives as we can reach.

The first characteristic, then, of the man who is likely to achieve the Quest of the Chief Good is, the Charity which prompts him to be gracious and show kindness and do good even to the thankless and ungracious. And his

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\* See Gal. vi. i.

second characteristic is the steadfast Industry which turns all seasons to account. The Man of Affairs, who wants to rise, waits on occasion : he is on the watch to avail himself of the moods and caprices of men and bend them to his interest. But he who has learned to value things at their true worth, and whose heart is fixed on the acquisition of the highest good, does not want to get on so much as he wants to do his duty in whatever station he may be placed, and under all the variable conditions of life. Just as he will not withhold his hand from giving, lest some of the recipients of his charity should prove unworthy ; so also he will not withdraw his hand from the labour appointed him, because this or that endeavour may be unproductive, or lest it should be thwarted by the ordinances of Heaven. He knows that the laws of Nature will hold on their way, often causing individual loss to promote the general good. He knows, for instance, that when the clouds are full of rain, they *will* empty themselves upon the earth, even though they put his harvest in peril ; and that when the wind is fierce, it will blow down trees, even though it should also scatter the seed which he is sowing. But he does not therefore wait upon the wind till it is too late to sow, nor upon the clouds till his ungathered crops rot in the fields. He is conscious that, though he knows much, he knows little of these as of other works of God : he cannot tell whether this tree or that will be blown down ; almost all he is certain of is that, when the tree

is down, it will lie where it has fallen, lifting its bleeding roots in dumb protest against the wind which has laid it low. But *this* too he knows, that it is "God who worketh all;" that *he* is not responsible for events beyond his control: that what he is responsible for is that he do his duty whatever wind may blow, and calmly leave the issue in the hand of God. And so, diligent and undismayed, he goes on his way, giving himself heartily to the present duty, "sowing his seed, morning and evening, although he cannot tell which shall prosper, this or that, or whether both shall prove good" (vv. 3—6). Windy March cannot blow him from his constant purpose, though it may blow the seed out of his hand; nor a rainy August melt him to despairing tears, though it may damage his harvest. He has done his duty, discharged his responsibility: let God see to the rest: whatever pleases God will content him.

This man, then, has already learned one or two of the profoundest secrets of Wisdom. He has learned that, giving, we gain; and, spending, thrive. He has also learned that a man's true care is himself; that all which pertains to the body, to the issues of labour, to the chances of fortune, is external to himself; that whatever form these may take, he may learn from them, and profit by them, and be content in them: that his true business in the world is to cultivate a strong dutiful character which shall prepare him for any world or any fate; and that so long



as he can do that, his main duty will be done, his ruling object attained.

Is not this the true wisdom? is it not an abiding good? Pleasures may bloom and fade. Speculations may shift and change. Riches may come and go—what else have they wings for? The body may sicken or strengthen. The favour of men may be conferred and withdrawn. There is no stability in these; and if we are dependent on them, we shall be variable and inconstant as they are. But if we make it our chief aim to do our duty whatever it may be, and to love our neighbour even though he be envious and thankless; we have an aim always within our reach, a duty we may be always doing, a good enduring as the immortal soul, and therefore a good we may enjoy for ever. Standing on this rock, “the light will be sweet to us, and it shall be pleasant to our eyes to behold the sun,” whatever the day, or the world, on which he may rise (v. 7).

But is all our life to be taken up in meeting the claims of Duty and Charity? Are we never to relax into mirth? never to look forward to a time in which reward will be more exactly adjusted to service? Yes; we are to do both this and that. It is very true that he who makes it his ruling aim to do the present duty and leave the future with God, will live a happy because a useful life. He that walks this path of duty



only thirsting  
For the right, and learns to deaden  
Love of self, before his journey closes,  
He shall find the stubborn thistle bursting  
Into glossy purples, which outredden  
All voluptuous garden roses.

The path may often be difficult and steep ; it may be overhung with threatening rocks and strewed with "stones of offence ;" but he who pursues it, still pressing on "through the long gorge" and winning his way upward,

Shall find the toppling crags of Duty scaled,  
Are close upon the shining table-lands  
To which our God Himself is moon and sun.

Nevertheless, if his life is to be full and complete, he must be able to pluck whatever bright flowers of joy spring beside his path, to find "laughing waters" in the crags he climbs, and to rejoice not only in "the glossy purples" of the stubborn thistle, but in the delicate beauty of the ferns, the pure grace of the cyclamens, and the sweet breath of the fragrant grasses and flowers which haunt those severe heights. If he is to be a man rather than a Stoic or an Anchorite, he must add to his sense of duty a keen delight in all beauty, all grace, all pleasure. For the sake of others, too, as well as for his own sake, he must carry with him "the merry heart which doeth good like a medicine," since lacking that, he will neither do all the good he might, nor

himself become perfect and complete. And it is proof, I think, of the good divinity no less than of the broad humanity of the Preacher, that he lays much stress on this point. He not only bids us enjoy life, but gives us cogent reasons for enjoying it. "Even," he says, "if a man should live many years, he ought to enjoy them all." But why? "Because there will be many dark days," days of old age and its accompanying infirmities, in which pleasures will lose their charm; days of death in which he will sleep quietly in the dark stillness of the grave, beyond the touch of the happy excitements granted us here (v. 8). Therefore the man who attains the Chief Good will not only do the duty of the moment; he will also enjoy the pleasure of the moment. *He* will not toil through the day of life, till, spent and weary, he has no power to enjoy his "much goods," or no time for his soul to "make merry and be glad." While he is "a young man," he will "rejoice in his youth, and let his heart cheer him," and go after the pleasures which attract youth (v. 9). While his heart is still fresh, when pleasures are most innocent and healthful, easiest of attainment and unalloyed by anxiety and care, he will cultivate that cheerful happy temper which is a prime safeguard against vice, discontent, and the morose fretfulness of a selfish old age.

But soft; is not our man of men becoming a mere man of pleasure? Will not he run the riot of the senses, and soon have to say to Mirth "Thou art mad!" and to Pleasure

Combined with a  
steadfast Faith in the  
Life to come.

Chap. XI., v. 9, to  
Chap. XII., v. 7.

“What canst thou do?” No : for he is not a mere votary of Pleasure. As we have seen, he recognizes the claims of Duty and of Charity, and does not reject these for that. These keep his pleasures sweet and wholesome, prevent them from usurping the whole man and landing him in the weariness and satiety of dissipation. But lest even these safeguards should prove insufficient, he has also this : he knows that “God will bring him into judgment ;” that all his works, whether of charity or duty or recreation, will be weighed in the balance of Divine Justice (v. 9). *This* is the simple secret of the pure heart—the heart that is kept pure amid all labours and cares and joys. But the intention of the Preacher in thus adverting to the Divine Judgment has been gravely misconstrued—wrested even to its very opposite. We too much forget what that Judgment must have seemed to the enslaved Jews ;—how weighty a consolation ! how bright a hope ! They were captive exiles, oppressed by profligate despotic lords. Cleaving to the Divine Law with a passionate loyalty such as they had never felt in happier days, they were nevertheless exposed to the most dire and constant misfortunes. All the blessings which the Law pronounced on the obedient seemed withheld from them, all its promises of good and peace to be falsified ; the wicked triumphed over them, and prospered in their wickedness. Now to a people whose convictions and hopes had suffered this miserable defeat, what truth would be more welcome than that of a life to come,

in which all wrongs should be both righted and avenged, and all the promises in which they had hoped should receive a large fulfilment that would beggar hope? what prospect could be more cheerful and consolatory than that of a day of retribution, on which their oppressors would be shamed, and *they* be recompensed for their fidelity to the Law of God? This hope would be sweeter to them than any pleasure: it would lend a new zest to every pleasure, and make them more zealous in good works.\*

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\* Nay, we know from the Psalms composed during the period of the Captivity that the judgment of God *was* an incentive to hope and joy; that, instead of fearing it, the oppressed captives looked forward to it with rapture and exultation. What, for example, can be more riant and joyful than the concluding strophe of Psalm xvi.?

Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad,  
 Let the sea make a noise and all that therein is;  
 Let the field be joyful and all that is in it,  
 And let all the trees of the wood rejoice  
 Before Jehovah; for He cometh,  
 For He cometh *to judge the Earth,*  
*To judge the world with His righteousness*  
*And the people with His truth:*

or than the third strophe of Psalm xviii.?

Let the sea make a noise and all that therein is,  
 The world and they that dwell in it;  
 Let the floods clap their hands  
 And let the hills be joyful together,  
 Before Jehovah; *for He cometh to judge the Earth:*  
*With righteousness shall He judge the world,*  
*And the people with equity.*

It is impossible to read these verses without feeling that the Jews of the Captivity anticipated the Divine Judgment, not with fear and dread, but with a hope the most bright and glad.

If we remembered this, we should not so readily agree with those Commentators who suppose the Preacher to be speaking ironically in this verse (v. 9), as though he would defy his readers to enjoy their pleasures with the thought of God and His judgment in their minds. We should rather understand that he was making their life more cheerful to them; that he was removing the blight of hopeless despair which had fallen on it; that he was kindling in their dreary future a light which would shine even upon the darkened present with most gracious and kindly rays. All wrongs would be easier to bear, all duties would be more heartily done, all alleviating pleasures would grow more welcome, if once they were fully persuaded that there was a life beyond death, a life in which the good would be "comforted" and the evil "tormented." It is on the express ground that there is a Judgment, that the Preacher, in the last verse of this Eleventh Chapter, bids them "banish care and sadness:"—though he also adds another reason, a reason which no longer afflicts him, viz. that "youth and manhood are vanity." Mark how quickly the force of this great hope has reversed his position. Only in the eighth verse of this Chapter, the very instant before he states his hope, he urges men to enjoy the present, "because all that is coming is vanity," because there were so many dark days, days of infirm age and dreary death, at hand. But here, in the tenth verse, the very moment he has stated his hope of a future life, he urges them to enjoy the present

not because the future is vanity, but because the present is vanity, because youth and manhood soon pass and the pleasures proper to them will soon be out of reach. Why should they be any longer fretted with care and anxiety when the Lamp of Revelation shone so brightly on the future? Why should they not be cheerful when so happy a prospect lay before them? Why should they sit brooding over their wrongs when their wrongs were so soon to be righted and they were to enter on so ample a recompense of reward? Why should they not travel towards that happy future with light hearts, hearts attuned to mirth, and responsive to every touch of pleasure?

But is the thought of the Judgment to be no check on our pleasures? Well, it is certainly used in this passage as an incentive to pleasure. We are to be happy *because* we are to meet God, because there is a bright future life, because in the Judgment He will compensate all the wrongs and afflictions of time. But it is not every one who can take to himself the full comfort of this argument. Only he can do that, who makes it his ruling aim to do his duty and to help his neighbour. And no doubt even he will find the hope of judgment—for with him it is a hope, not a fear—a valuable check not on his pleasures, but on those base counterfeits which often pass for pleasures, and which betray men through voluptuousness into satiety, disgust, remorse. Because he hopes to meet God, and has to give account of himself to God, he will resist the



evil lusts which pollute and degrade the soul : and thus the prospect of the Judgment will become a safeguard and a defence. But he has a safeguard of even a more sovereign potency than this. For he not only looks forward to a future judgment ; he is conscious of a present and constant judgment. God is with him wherever he goes. From "the days of his youth," he has "remembered his Creator" (chap. xii. v. 1). He has remembered *Him* ; and given to the poor and needy. He has remembered *Him*, and, doing all things as to *Him*, duty has grown light. He has remembered *Him*, and his pleasures have grown the sweeter because they were gifts from Heaven, and because he has taken them, in a thankful spirit, for a temperate enjoyment. Of all safeguards to a life of virtue, this is the noblest and the best. We can afford, indeed, to part with none of them, for we are very weak and need all helps ; but least of all can we afford to part with this. We need to remember that we must all appear before the judgment-seat of God, to render an account of the deeds done in the body. But above all—if love, and not fear, is to be the animating spirit of our life—we need to remember that God is always with us ; observing what we do, not that He may gather heavy charges against us, but that He may help us to do well ; not to frown upon our pleasures, but to hallow and deepen and prolong them, and to be Himself our Chief Good and our Supreme Delight.



‘ Live while you live,’ the Epicure would say,  
‘ And seize the pleasure of the present day.’  
‘ Live while you live,’ the Sacred Preacher cries,  
‘ And give to God each moment as it flies.’  
Lord, in my view let both united be,  
I live in pleasure while I live in Thee.\*

Finally, the Preacher enforces this early and habitual reference of the soul to the Divine Presence and Will by a brief allusion to the impotence and weariness of a godless old age, and by a very striking description of the terrors of the death in which it culminates.

While “ the dew of youth ” is still fresh upon us we are to “ remember our Creator ” and His constant judgment of us, lest, forgetting Him, we should waste our powers in sensual excess ; lest temperate mirth should degenerate into an extravagant and wanton devotion to pleasure ; lest the lust of mere physical enjoyment should outlive the power of enjoyment, and, groaning under the penalties our unbridled indulgence has provoked, we should find “ days of evil ” rise on us in long succession and draw out into “ years ” of fruitless desire, self-disgust, and despair (verse 1). “ Before the evil days come,” and that they may not come ; before “ the years arrive of which we shall say ‘ I have no pleasure in them ! ’ ” and that they may not arrive,

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\* *Dum vivimus viviamus.*—Doddridge.

we are to bethink us of the Pure and Awful Presence in which we daily stand. God is with us that we may not sin ; with us in youth that the angel of His Presence may save us from the sins to which youth is prone ; with us to save us from the sins of youth that our closing years may have the cheerful serenity of happy old age.

To this admonition drawn from the miseries of godless age, the Preacher subjoins a description of the terrors of approaching death (vv. 2—5),—a description which has suffered many strange torments at the hands of the Commentators. It has commonly been read as an allegorical, but singularly accurate, diagnosis of the breaking up of man's physical frame, as setting forth in graphic figures the gradual decay of sense after sense, faculty after faculty.\*

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\* It may be worth while to specify some of the gross and absurd conjectures, some also of the strange differences, into which what may be called *the medical reading* of this passage has betrayed even the most learned Commentators. Ginsburg, who really seems to have read well-nigh all in every language which has been written on Ecclesiastes, has a wonderful collection of them distributed through his "Notes" to these verses. I select and combine a few of them. The darkening of the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars (verse 2), for instance, is taken by one great authority (the Talmud) to mean the darkening of the forehead, the nose, the soul, and the teeth ; by another (the Chaldee Paraphrast), the obscuring of the face, the eyes, the cheeks, and the apples of the eyes ; by a third (Dr. Smith, in his "Portraiture of Old Age"), for the decay of all the mental faculties. That "the clouds return after the rain" signifies, according to Ibn Ezra, the constant dimness of the eyes ; according to Le Clerc, a bad influenza, accompanied with unceasing snuffling. "The keepers of the house" (verse 3) are the ribs and the loins (Talmud), the knees (Chaldee), and the hands and arms (Ibn Ezra). "The men of power" are the thighs

Learned physicians have written treatises upon it, and have been lost in admiration of the force and beauty of the metaphors in which it conveys the results of their special science, although they differ in their interpretation of almost every sentence, and are driven at times to the most gross and absurd conjectures in order to sustain their several theories. I need not trouble you, however, with

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(Talmud), and *the arms* (Chaldee). "The grinding maids" are *the teeth*, and "the women who look out of windows" are *the eyes*. "The door closed on the street" is *the pores of the skin* (Dr. Smith), *the lips* (Ibn Ezra), and *the eyes* (Henstenberg). That "the noise of the mill grows faint" (verse 4) means that *the mastication of food becomes imperfect* (Dr. Smith), that *the appetite fails* (Chaldee), that *the voice grows feeble* (Grotius). That "the song-birds descend to their nests" signifies that *music and songs are a bore to the aged man* (Talmud), that he is no longer *able to sing* (Chaldee), that *his ears are heavy* (Grotius). The allusion to "the almond" (verse 5) denotes that *the haunch-bone shall come out from leanness* (Talmud), or (Reynolds) it denotes *the hoary hair which comes quickly on a man, just as the almond-tree thrusts out her blossoms before any other tree*; while at least half-a-dozen scholars and physicians affirm that it points to *membrum gentile or glans virilis*. That "the locust becomes a burden" means that *the ankles swell* (Chaldee), *gout in the feet* (Jerome), *a projecting stomach* (Le Clerc), *the dry shrivelled frame of an old man* (Dr. Smith). Almost all modern Commentators take the reference to "the caper-berry" as marking that provocatives to lust lose their power with the aged. "The silver cord" and "golden bowl" of verse 6, are *the tongue and the skull* (Chaldee), *spina dorsi and pia mater, backbone and brain* (Dr. Smith), *urine and bladder* (Gasper Sanetius); while "the bucket" is either *the gall or the right ventricle of the heart*, and "the wheel" that draws the water is an image of the air-inspiring lungs.

Now of course it would not be just to condemn any interpretation simply because it is weighted with absurdities and contradictions, though it surely requires a very strong theory to carry such a mass of gross and opposed readings as I have just cited. But when an interpretation is so obviously

any detailed account of their speculations, for the simple reason that they are based, as I believe, on an entire misconception of the Sacred Text. Instead of being, as they have supposed, a figurative description of the dissolution of the body, it sets forth the threatening approach of Death under the image of a tempest which, gathering over an Eastern city during the day, breaks upon it towards evening. I do not know that we can better arrive at its meaning and force than by considering what would be the incidents which would strike us if we were to stroll through the narrow tortuous streets of such a city as the day was closing in.

As we passed along we should find rows of small houses and shops, broken here and there by a wide stretch of blank wall, behind which were the mansions, harems, courtyards of its wealthier inhabitants. Round and within the low narrow gates which gave access to these mansions, we should see armed men lounging whose duty it is to guard

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forced and fanciful as that we are here considering, when it is so remarkably ingenious and leaves to ingenuity so wide and lawless a scope, we shall do well to hesitate before accepting it. And if another interpretation be offered us, as in the text, which gives a literal rendering to every phrase instead of a figurative rendering, which bases itself on the common household facts of Eastern experience instead of on the niceties of Western science, which instead of being contradictory and absurd is coherent and impressive, we really have no alternative before us. We cannot but reject the former for the latter interpretation; the ingenious puzzle, capable of so many and various solutions, loses its charm when confronted with the simplicities of Nature and Truth.

the premises against robbers and intruders : these are "the keepers of the house" (v. 3), over whom, as over the whole household, are placed superior officials, or "men of power." Going through the gates and glancing up at the latticed windows, we might catch glimpses of the veiled faces of the ladies of the house who, not being permitted to stir abroad except on rare occasions and under jealous guardianship, are accustomed to amuse their dreary leisure, and to learn a little of what is going on around them, by "looking out of the windows." Within the house, the gentlemen of the family would be enjoying the chief meal of the day, provoking appetite with delicacies such as "the locust,"\* or condiments such as "the caper-berry,"† or with choice

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\* This locust (Châgâb) is one of the four kinds which the Law of Moses marked out as fit for human food. To this day locusts are held in the East to be a very agreeable and nutritious diet. There are many ways of preparing them for the table. They may be pounded with flour and water, and made into cakes. They may be smoked, boiled, roasted, stewed, and fried in butter. They may be salted with salt; and thus treated, are eaten by the Arabs as a great delicacy. Or they may be dried in the sun, and then steeped in wine : baskets of them, prepared in this way, are to be commonly seen in Eastern markets. Dr. Kitto, who often ate them, says that they taste more like shrimps than anything else. Dr. Shaw says that they are quite as good as our fresh-water crayfish.

† The Caper plant grows abundantly in Asia, as it does also in Africa and Southern Europe. It commonly springs in the crevices of walls, on heaps of ruins, or on barren wastes, and forms a diffuse many-branched shrub. Its flowers are large and showy; the four petals are white, but the long numerous stamens have their filaments tinged with purple, and terminate in yellow anthers. As the ovary ripens it droops and forms a pear-shaped berry, which holds in its

fruit such as "the almond."\* Above all the shrill cries and noises of the city you would hear a loud humming sound rising on every side, for which you would be sorely puzzled to account if you were a stranger to Eastern habits. It is the sound of the cornmills which towards evening are at work in every house. A cornmill was indispensable to every Eastern family, since there were no public mills or bakers except the king's. The heat of the climate makes it necessary that corn should be ground and bread baked every day. And as the task of grinding at the mill was very irksome, only the most menial class of women, often slaves or captives, were employed upon it. Of course the noise occasioned by the upper upon the nether millstone was very great when the mills were simultaneously at work in every house in the city. No sound is more familiar in the East; and if it were suddenly stopped, the effect would be as striking as the sudden stoppage of all the wheels of traffic in one of our English towns. So familiar was

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pulp, many small seeds. Almost every part of the shrub has been used as a condiment by the ancients. The stalk and seed were salted, or preserved in vinegar or wine. Its buds are still held an agreeable sauce—we eat them with boiled mutton. And the berries possess irritant properties which won them high esteem among the Orientals as a provocative to appetite.

\* The fruit of the almond-tree is still reckoned one of the most delicate and delicious fruits in the East. We may fancy that we are acquainted with it, that we know "almonds" at least as well as we know "raisins." But, I believe, that the almond we eat is only the kernel of the stone in the true almond: the fruit itself is of the same order with apricots, peaches, plums.



the sound, indeed, and of such good omen, that in Holy Writ it is used as a symbol of a happy, active, well-provided people; while the cessation of it is employed to denote want, and desolation, and despair. To an Oriental ear no threat would be more doleful and pathetic than that in Jeremiah,\* "I will take from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, *the sound of the millstones*, and the light of the candle."

Now suppose that the day on which we rambled through the city had been lowering and boisterous; that heavy rain had fallen, obscuring all the lights of heaven; and that, as the evening drew on, the thick clouds, instead of dispersing, had "returned after the rain," so that setting sun, and rising moon, and the growing light of stars were all blotted from view (v. 2). The tempest, long in gathering, breaks on the city; the lightnings flash through the darkness, making it more hideous; the thunder crashes and rolls above the roofs; the tearing rain beats at all lattices and floods all roads. If we cared to abide the pelting of the storm, we should have before us the very scene which the Preacher here depicts. "The keepers of the house," the guards and porters, would "quake." "The men of power," the official superiors, would "writhe" and tremble

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\* Jeremiah xxv. 10.



with apprehension. The maids at the mill would "stop" because one or other of the two women whom it took to work the heavy millstone had been frightened from her task by the gleaming lightning and the pealing thunder. The ladies looking out of their lattices would be driven back into the darkest corners of the inner rooms of the harem. Every door would be closed and barred, lest robbers, availing themselves of the darkness and its terrors, should creep in (v. 3). "The noise of the mills" would grow faint, because the threatening tumult had "greatly diminished" the number of the grinding-maids. The strong-winged "swallow," lover of wind and tempest, would fly to and fro with shrieks of joy; while the delicate "song-birds" would hurry to the shelter of their nests and eaves. The gentlemen of the house would lose all gust for their delicate eates\* and fruits; "the almond would be despised, the locust loathed, and even the stimulating caper-berry provoke no appetite," fear being a singularly unwelcome and disappetizing guest at a feast. In short, the whole people, stunned and confused by the awful and stupendous ma-

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\* Sir Henry Rawlinson says: "At the present day, among the 'bons vivants' of Persia, it is usual to sit for hours before dinner drinking wine and eating dried fruits, such as filberts, almonds, pistachio-nuts, melon-seeds, &c. A party, indeed, often sits down at seven o'clock, and the dinner is not brought in till eleven. The dessert dishes, intermingled as they are with highly seasoned delicacies, are supposed to have the effect of stimulating the appetite."

Notes to *Rawlinson's Herodotus*, Vol. I. p. 274.

jesty of a tropical storm, would be "affrighted" at "the terrors" which came flaming from "the height" of heaven to confront them "in their way" (vv. 4, 5).

Such and so terrible is the tempest that at times sweeps over an Eastern city.\* Such and so terrible, adds the Preacher, is death to the godless and sensual. They are carried away as by a storm; the wind riseth and snatcheth them out of their place. For if we ask, "Why, O Preacher, has your pencil laboured to depict the terrors of tempest?" he replies, "Because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners pace up and down the street" (v. 5). He leaves us in no doubt as to the moral of his fable, the theme of his picture. While painting it, while adding touch to touch, he has been thinking of "the long home,"—or, as the Hebrew has it, "the house of eternity;" a phrase still used by the Jews as a synonym for "the grave"—which is appointed for all living, and of the mercenary professional mourners who loiter under the windows of the dying man in the hope that they may be hired to lament him. To the expiring sinner death is simply dreadful. It puts an end to all his activities and enjoyments, just as the tempest brings all the labours and recreations of the city to a pause.

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\* It should be borne in mind that the comparative rarity of thunder-storms in Syria and the adjacent lands makes them much more dreadful to the inhabitants of those countries. Throughout the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms, we find many traces of the dread which such storms inspired—a dread almost unaccountable to our accustomed nerves.

He has nothing before him but the grave, and none to mourn him but the harpies who already pace the street longing for the moment when he will be gone, and who value their fee far above his life. If we would have death shorn of its terrors for us, we must "remember our Creator" before death comes; we must seek, by charity, by a faithful discharge of duty, by a wise use and a wise enjoyment of the life that now is, to have prepared ourselves for the life which is to come.

Death itself, as the Preacher proceeds to remind us (v. 6), cannot be escaped. Some day the cord will break and the lamp fall; some day the bucket must be broken and the wheel shattered. Death is the common event, the universal and inevitable event. It befalls not only the sinful and injurious, but also the useful and the good. Our life may have been like a "golden" lamp suspended by "silver" chains, fit for the palace of a king, and may have shed a welcome and cheerful light on every side: but nevertheless even the durable costly chain will be snapt at last and the costly beautiful bowl be broken. Our life may have been like "the bucket" dropped by village maidens into the village fountain, or like "the wheel" by which water is drawn from the city well; it may have conveyed a vital refreshment to many lips: but nevertheless the day must come when the bucket will be shattered on the marble edge of the fountain, and the time-worn wheel drop into the well. There is no escape from

death. And, therefore, as we must all die, let us all live as cheerfully and helpfully as we can: let us all prepare for the better life beyond the grave by serving our Creator before "the body is cast upon the earth from which it came, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (v. 7).

This, then, is the man who achieves the Quest of the Chief Good.—Charitable, dutiful, cheerful, he prepares himself for death by a useful and happy life, for future judgment by a constant reference to the present judgment, for meeting God hereafter by dwelling with Him here.

Has he not achieved the Quest? Can we hope to find a more solid, enduring, universal Good? What to him are the shocks of Change, the blows of Circumstance, the mutations of Time, the fluctuations of Fortune? These cannot touch the Good which he holds to be Chief. If they bring trouble, he can bear trouble and profit by it: if they bring prosperity, happiness, mirth, he can bear even these, and not value them beyond their worth or abuse them to his hurt: for his Good, and therefore his peace and blessedness, are founded on a Rock over which the changeful waves may wash, but against which they cannot prevail. Let the sun shine never so hotly, let the storm beat never so furiously, the Rock stands firm, and the house which he has built for himself upon the Rock. Whatever may befall, he can be doing his main work, enjoying his supreme satisfaction, since he can meet all


changes with a dutiful and loving heart ; since through all he may be forming a noble character and helping his neighbours to form a character as noble as his own. Because he has a gracious God always with him, and because a bright future stretches before him in endless and widening vistas of hope, he can carry to all the wrongs and afflictions of time a cheerful spirit which shines through them with transfiguring rays,—a spirit before which even the thick darkness of death will grow light, and the solemnities of the Judgment be turned into holiday festivity and triumph. Ah, foolish and miserable that we are, who, with so noble a life, and so bright a prospect, and a Good so enduring open to us, nevertheless creep about the earth the slaves of every accident, the very fools of Time !

## THE EPILOGUE:

*In which the Problem of the Book is conclusively solved.*

*Chap. XII. vv. 8—14.*

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“TUDENTS,” says the Talmud, “are of four kinds: they are like a sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve: like a sponge that sucketh all up; like a funnel which receiveth at one end and dischargeth at the other; like a strainer which letteth the wine pass but retaineth the lees; and like a sieve which dischargeth the bran but retaineth the corn.” To which of these shall we liken the Preacher? We can only liken him to the “sieve.” He is the good student who has sifted all the schemes and thoughts and pursuits of men, separating the wheat from the bran, teaching us to know the bran as bran, the wheat as wheat. It is a true “corn of heaven” which he offers us, and not any of the husks to obtain which reckless and prodigal man has often wasted his whole living,—husks which, though they have the form and hue of wheat, have not its life and nutriment, and cannot therefore satisfy the keen hunger of the soul.

We have now followed the sifting process to its close ; much bran lies about our feet, but a little corn is in our hands, and from this little there may grow " a harvest unto life." Starting in Quest of that Chief Good in which, when once it is attained, we can rest with an unbroken and measureless content, we have learned that it is not to be found in Wisdom, in Pleasure, in Devotion to Business and Public Affairs, in a modest Competence or in boundless Wealth. We have learned that only he achieves this supreme Quest who is " charitable, dutiful, cheerful ;" only he who " by a wise use and a wise enjoyment of the present life prepares himself for the life which is to come." We have learned that the best incentives to this life of virtue, and its best safeguards, are a constant remembrance of our Creator and of His perpetual presence with us, and a constant hope of that future judgment in which all the wrongs of time are to be redressed and recompensed. And here we might think our task was ended. We might suppose that the Preacher would dismiss us from the School in which he has so long held us by his sage maxims, his vivid illustrations, his gracious warnings and encouragements. But even yet he will not suffer us to depart. He has still " words to utter for God," words which it will be well for us to hear. As in the Prologue prefixed to this Drama he had stated the Problem he was about to take in hand, so now he subjoins an Epilogue in which he re-states that Solution of it at which he has arrived. His last words



are, as we should expect them to be, heavily weighted with thought. So closely packed are his thoughts, indeed, as to give a disconnected and illogical tone to his words. Every saying seems to stand alone, complete in itself: and hence our main difficulty in dealing with this Epilogue is to trace the links of sequence which bind saying to saying, thought to thought, and, having traced, to bear them well in mind. Every verse supplies a text for patient meditation, or a theme which needs to be illustrated by historic facts that lie beyond the general reach: and the danger is lest, while dwelling on these separate themes and texts, we should fail to gather their connected meaning and to grasp the large conclusion to which they are all intended to conduct.

Cohemoth commences (v. 8) by once more striking the key-note in which his whole work is set: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity!" We are not, however, to take these words as announcing his deliberate verdict on the sum of human endeavours and affairs; for he has now discovered the true abiding Good which underlies all the vanities of earth and time. His repetition of this familiar phrase is simply a touch of art by which the Poet reminds us of what the main theme of his Poem has been, of the pain and weariness and disappointment which have attended his long Quest. As it falls once more, and for the last time, on our ear, we cannot but remember how often, and in what connections, we have heard it before.

Memory and Imagination are set to work. The whole course of the Sacred Drama passes swiftly before us, with its mournful pauses of defeated hope, as we listen to this echo of the despair with which the baffled Preacher has so often returned from seeking the true Good in first this and then that province of human life.

Having thus reminded us of the several stages of his Quest, and of the verdict which he had been compelled to pronounce at the close of each, Coheleth proceeds (v. 9) to set forth his qualifications for undertaking this sore task: "Not only was the Preacher wise, he also taught the people wisdom, and composed many parables with care and thought." His claims are that he is a sage, a public teacher, and an author; his motive in setting them forth is doubtless simply that he may the more deeply impress upon us the conclusion to which he has come and which it has cost him so much to reach.

Now during the Captivity there was a singular outbreak of literary activity in the Hebrew race. As yet this crisis in their history is little studied and understood; but we shall only follow the Preacher's meaning, in vv. 9—12, as we collect such information concerning it as we can. That a change of the most radical and extraordinary kind passed upon the Hebrews of this period, that they were by some means drawn to a study of the Sacred Writings infinitely more thorough and intense than any which went before it, we know: but of the causes of this change we are yet

ignorant.\* A great, perhaps the greatest, living authority† on this subject writes: "One of the most mysterious and momentous periods in the history of humanity is that brief space of the Exile. What were the influences brought to bear on the captives during that time, we know not. But this we know, that from a reckless, lawless, godless populace, they returned transformed into a band of Puritans. The religion of Zerdusht (Zoroaster), though it has left its traces in Judaism, fails to account for that change. . . . Yet the change is there, palpable, unmistakable—a change which we may regard as almost miraculous. Scarcely

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\* In the Introduction, however, I have tried to give what is known of the history of this time. Roughly speaking, I believe the Jews owe their literary advance to contact with the inquisitive and learned Babylonians, and their religious advance to contact with the pure faith of the primitive Persians.

† Emmanuel Deutsch. The passage will be found in his article on "The Talmud" in the *Quarterly* of October '67. No one could well be more charmed with that masterly article than I was, or more indebted to it—indeed in this Chapter I shall often quote from it: nevertheless, I confess to bearing it some little grudge. For ten years now, under every disadvantage and with infinite difficulty, I have been collecting the gnomic sayings of the Talmud—I printed a score or two of them eighteen months ago (*Christian Spectator*, December '66); and here came one of the most learned scholars of Europe and carelessly flung down out of his profuse wealth most of *my* special treasures, making me feel poor indeed! Only about half-a-dozen of the sayings I had painfully collected will now have any stamp of novelty upon them; and these are so noble in thought and expression that the only wonder is Deutsch left even one of them behind him. To the lover of proverbs let me specially commend the sayings, than which I know none more perfect, on the four kinds of students, on new and old flasks, on not serving God for the sake of reward, and on doing God's will as though it were ours: they will all be found in this Chapter, as will many more with which Deutsch has already enriched them.

aware before of the existence of their glorious national literature, the people now began to press round these brands plucked from the fire—the scanty records of their faith and history—with a fierce and passionate love, a love stronger even than that of wife and child. These same documents, as they were gradually formed into a canon, became the immutable centre of their lives, their actions, their thoughts, their very dreams. From that time forth, with scarcely any intermission, the keenest as well as the most poetical minds of the nation remained fixed upon them.”

The more we think of this change, the more the wonder grows. Good kings and inspired prophets had desired to see the nation devoted to the Word of God, had spent their lives in vain endeavours to recall the thought and affection of their race to the Sacred Records in which the Will of God was revealed. But what they failed to do was done when the inspiration of the Almighty was withdrawn and the voice of Prophecy had grown mute. In their Captivity, under the strange wrongs and miseries of their Exile, the Jews remembered God their Maker, Giver of Songs in the night. They betook themselves to the study of the Sacred Oracles. They began to acquaint themselves with all wisdom that they might define and illustrate whatever was obscure in the Scriptures of their fathers. They commenced that elaborate systematic Commentary of which many noble fragments are still extant. They drew new truths from the old letter, or from the

collocation of scattered passages,—as, for instance, the truths of the immortality of the soul and of the resurrection of the body. They laid the hidden foundations of the Synagogues and Schools which afterwards covered their land. Ezra and Nehemiah who, by grace of the Persian conquerors, led them back from Babylonia to Jerusalem are still claimed as the founders of the Great Synagogue, *i.e.* as the leaders of that great race of jurists, teachers, authors whose utterances are still a law in Israel, and of whom the Lawyers and Scribes of the New Testament were more modern successors. Before the Captivity there was not a term for “school” in their language; there were at least a dozen in common use within two or three centuries after the accession of Cyrus. Education had become compulsory. Its immense value in the popular judgment is marked in innumerable popular sayings such as these: “Jerusalem was destroyed because the education of the young was neglected;” “Even for the rebuilding of the Temple the schools must not be interrupted;” “Study is more meritorious than sacrifice;” “A scholar is greater than a prophet;” “You should revere the teacher even more than your father; the latter only brought you into this world, the former shows you the way into the next.” To meet the national craving expressed in these and similar proverbs, innumerable copies of the Sacred Books, of commentaries and traditions and the gnomic utterances of the wise, were written and circulated, of which, in the

Canon, in some of the Apocryphal Scriptures, in the works of Philo, and in the legal and legendary sections of the Talmud, some specimens have come down to us. In short, whatever was the cause of this marvellous outburst, there can be no doubt that the whole Rabbinical period was characterized by a devotion to learning, a mental and literary activity, much more general and intense than it is easy for us to conceive.

In such an age the words of a professed and acknowledged "Sage" would carry great weight. If besides being "wise," he were a recognized "Teacher," a man whose wisdom was stamped by public and official approval, whatever fell from his lips would command public attention. For these teachers or "rabbis" were the real rulers of the time, and not the pharisees or the priests. They did not scruple to jest at the ignorance or licence of the priests, at the bare-faced hypocrisy of many of the pharisees. They might be, they often were, "tent-makers, sandal-makers, weavers, carpenters, tanners, bakers, cooks," for it is among their highest claims to our respect that these learned rabbis revered labour, however menial and toilsome, that they held mere scholarship and piety of little worth unless conjoined with regular and healthy physical exertion. But however toilsome their lives, or humble their circumstances, these "Wise Men" were "Masters of the Law." It was their special function to interpret the Law of Moses—which, remember, was the law of the land—to explain its bearing



on this case or that ; and, as members of the local courts or of the metropolitan Sanhedrin, to administer the law they expounded. An immense power, therefore, was in their hands. To obey the law was to be at once loyal and religious, happy here and hereafter. And therefore the rabbis, whose business it was to apply the law to all the details of life, and whose decisions were authoritative and final, could not fail to command universal deference and respect. They were Lawyers, Judges, Schoolmasters, Heads of Colleges, Public Orators and Lecturers, Statesmen and Preachers, all in one or all in turn, and therefore concentrated on themselves the respect which we distribute on many offices and many men.

Such a Rabbi was Coheleth. He was of "the Wise ;" he was a "Master of the Law." And, in addition to these claims, he was also an Author who had "composed many parables with care and thought." Than this latter he could hardly have any higher claim to the regard, and even to the affection, of the Hebrew public. We all know the passionate attachment of Oriental races to fables, to stories of any and every kind. And the Jews for whom Coheleth wrote took, as was very natural at such a time, an extraordinary delight, extraordinary even for the East, in listening to and repeating the proverbs, parables, poems of their national authors. Some of these are still in our hands ; as we read them, we cease to wonder at the intense enjoyment with which they were received by a generation not cloyed, as we



are, with books. They are not only charming as works of art; they have also this charm, that they convey moral instruction. Take a few of these pictorial proverbs: "The house that does not open to the poor will open to the physician." "Commit a sin twice, and you will begin to think it quite allowable." "The reward of good works is like dates—sweet, and ripening late." "Even when the gates of prayer are shut in heaven, the gate of tears is open." "When the righteous dies, it is the earth that loses: the lost jewel is still a jewel, but he who has lost it—well may he weep." "Who is wise? He who is willing to learn from all men. Who is strong? He who subdues his passions. Who is rich? He that is satisfied with his lot." All these, as you will admit, are happy expressions of profound moral truths. But the Rabbis are capable of putting a keener edge on their words; they can utter witty epigrams as sharp and incisive as those of any of our modern satirists, and yet use their wit in the service of good sense and morality. It would not be easy to match, it would be very hard to beat, such sayings as these: "The sun will go down by itself without your help." "When the ox is down, many are the butchers." "The soldiers fight, and the kings are the heroes." "The camel wanted horns, and they took away his ears." "The cock and the owl both wait for morning: the light brings joy to me, says the cock, but what are *you* waiting for?" "When the pitcher falls on the stone, woe to the pitcher; when the stone falls on the

pitcher, woe to the pitcher: whatever happens, woe to the pitcher." "Look not at the flask, but at that which is in it; for there are new flasks full of old wine, and old flasks which have not even new wine in them:"—ah, of how many of these "old flasks" have some of us had to drink or seem to drink! When the Rabbis draw out their moral at greater length, when they tell a story, their skill does not desert them. Here is one of the briefest; it will remind you of more than one of the parables uttered by the Great Teacher Himself: "There was once a king who bade all his servants to a great repast, but did not name the hour. Some went home and put on their best garments, and came and stood at the door of the palace. Others said, 'There is time enough, the king will let us know beforehand.' But the king summoned them of a sudden; and those that came in their best garments were well received, but the foolish ones, who came in their slovenliness, were turned away in disgrace. Repent ye to-day, lest ye be summoned to-morrow."

Do you wonder that the Jews, even in the sorrows of their Captivity, liked to hear such proverbs and parables as these? that they had an immense and grateful admiration for the men who spent much care and thought on the composition of these wise beautiful sayings? Would not you be glad to hear them when the day's work was done, or even while it was doing? If then such an one as Coheleth—a Sage, a Rabbi, a Composer of proverbs and

parables—came to them and said, “My children : I have sought what you are all seeking ; I have been in quest of that Chief Good which you now pursue ; and I will tell you the story of the Quest in the parables and proverbs which you are so fond of hearing :”—we can surely understand that they would be charmed to listen, that they would hang upon his words, that they would be predisposed to accept his conclusions. As they listened, and found that he was telling them their own story no less than his, that he was trying to lead them away from the vanities which they themselves knew to be vanities toward an abiding Good in which he had found rest : as they heard him enforce the duties of charity, industry, hilarity—duties which all their rabbis urged upon them, and invite them to that wise use and wise enjoyment of the present life which their own consciences approved : above all, as he unfolded before them the bright hope of a future judgment in which all wrongs would be redressed and all acts of duty receive a great recompence of reward,—would they not hail him as the wisest of their teachers, as the great rabbi who had achieved the supreme Quest of life ? Assuredly few books were, or are, more popular than the book *Ecclesiastes*. Its presence and influence are felt in every subsequent age and department of Hebrew Literature ; it has entered into our English Literature hardly less deeply. Many of its verses are simply familiar to us as household words. Brief as the Book is, I am disposed to think it better known to us

than any other of the Old Testament Books except Genesis, the Psalter, and the prophecies of Isaiah. Job is incomparably finer as it is a much longer poem; but I doubt whether most of us could not quote at least two verses from the shorter for every one we could repeat from the longer Book. We can very easily understand therefore that the Wise Preacher, as he himself assures us (v. 10), bestowed on this Sacred Drama no less care and thought than he had given to other Parables; that he had made diligent search for "words of comfort" by which he might solace and strengthen the hearts of his oppressed brethren, and that, having found his comfortable words, he "wrote them down" with a frank sincerity and "uprightness."

From this description of the motives which had impelled him to publish the results of his thought and experience, and of the spirit in which he had composed this beautiful Parable, Coheleth passes (in v. 11) to a description of the twofold function of the Teacher, which is really a marvellous little poem in itself, a pastoral cut on a gem. That function is on the one hand *conservative*, and on the other *progressive*. At times the Teacher's words are "like goads" with which the herdsmen prick on their cattle to new pastures, correcting them when they loiter or stray: at other times they are like the "stakes" which the shepherds drive into the ground when they pitch their tents on pastures where they intend to abide. "The words of *the Wise*," says Coheleth, "are like goads;" and "the Wise"

was a technical term for the sage teachers and masters who interpreted and administered the Law : while the words of "*the Masters of the Assemblies* are like fixed stakes," "*Masters of Assemblies* " being a technical name for the heads of the colleges and schools which, during the Rabbinical period, were to be found in every town, and in almost every hamlet, of Judæa. The same man might, and commonly did, bear both titles ; and in all probability Coheleth himself was both of the Wise and the Master of an Assembly.

What did these Masters teach ? Everything almost,—at least everything then known. It is true that their main function was to interpret and enforce the Law of Moses ; but this function demanded all science for its adequate fulfilment. Take a simple illustration. The Law says, "Thou shalt not kill." Here, if ever, is a plain and simple statute, with no ambiguities, capable of no misconstruction or evasion. Anybody may remember it, and know what it means. May they ? I am not so sure of that. The Law says I am not to kill. What ! not in self-defence ? not to save honour from outrage ? not in a patriotic war ? not to save my homestead from the freebooter, or my household from the midnight thief ? not when my kinsman is slain before my eyes and in my defence ? Many similar questions might be asked, and were asked, by the Jews. The Master had to consider such cases as these ; to study the recorded and traditional verdicts of previous judges,

the glosses and comments of previous Masters ; he had to lay down rules and to apply rules to particular and exceptional cases, just as our English judges have to define the Common Law or to interpret a Parliamentary Statute. The growing wants of the Commonwealth, the increasing complexity of the relations of life as the people of Israel came in contact with foreign races or were carried into captivity in strange lands, necessitated new laws, new rules of conduct. And as there was no despot to issue his decree, and no Parliament to pass an Act, the wise Masters, learned in the Law of God, were compelled to lay down these rules and laws, to extend and develop the ancient Mosaic Statutes till they covered modern cases and wants. Thus, in this very Book, Coheleth gives the rules which should govern a wise pious Jew in the new relations of Traffic (chap. iv. vv. 4—16), and in the service of foreign despots (chap. x. vv. 1—20). For such contingencies as these the Law of Moses made no provision : and therefore the Rabbis, who sat in Moses' chair, made provision for them by legislating in the spirit of the Law.

Even in the application of known laws there was need for care, and science, and thought. "The Mosaic Code has injunctions about the Sabbatical journey ; the distance had to be measured and calculated, and mathematics were called into play. Seeds, plants, and animals had to be studied in connection with many precepts regarding them, and natural history had to be appealed to. Then there were the purely



hygienic paragraphs, which necessitated for their precision a knowledge of all the medical science of the time. The 'seasons' and the feast-days were regulated by the phases of the moon; and astronomy, if only in its elements, had to be studied."\* As the Hebrews came successively into contact with Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, the political and religious systems of these foreign races could not fail to leave some impressions on their minds, and that these impressions might not be erroneous and misleading, it became the Master to acquaint himself with the results of foreign thought. Nay, "not only was science, in its widest sense, required of him, but even an acquaintance with its fantastic shadows, such as astrology, magic, and the rest, in order that he, as both law-giver and judge, should be able to enter into the popular feeling about these widespread 'arts,' and wisely control it.

The proofs that this varied knowledge was acquired and patiently applied to the study of the Law by the Masters in Israel are still with us in many learned sayings and essays of that time; and in all these essays the *conservative* temper is sufficiently prominent. Their leading aim evidently was to honour the Law of Moses; to preserve its spirit even in the new rules which the changed circumstances of the time imperatively required: to fix

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\* Deutsch on 'The Talmud' in the *Quarterly*.



their stakes and pitch their tents in the old fields of thought.

But, on the other hand, the signs of *progress* are no less obvious. Through all this mass of learned and deferential comment on the Mosaic Code there perpetually crop up sayings which savour of the Gospel rather than of the Law—sayings that denote a great advance of thought. “Study is better than sacrifice,” for instance, must have been a very surprising proverb to the backward-looking Jew. It is only one of many Rabbinical sayings conceived in the same spirit; but would not the priests, for example, listen to it with the wry clouded face of grave suspicion? So when Rabbi Hillel, anticipating the Golden Rule, said, “Do not unto another what thou wouldest not have another do unto thee: this is the whole law, the rest is mere commentary,” the sticklers for ceremonies and sacrifices, fasts and feasts, could hardly fail to be shocked: they would think the venerable Master had hardly shown his usual wisdom in uttering words which might so easily be abused. So, too, when Rabbi Antigonus said, “Be not as men who serve their master for the sake of reward, but be like men who serve not looking for reward;” or when Rabbi Gamaliel said, “Do God’s will as if it were thy will, that He may accomplish thy will as if it were His,” many no doubt would feel that they were listening to very novel, and perhaps dangerous, doctrine. Nor could they fail to see that new fields of thought were being thrown open to them when Rabbi

Cohelah—if we may for once use Cohelah as a proper name—affirmed the future judgment and the future life of men. Such “words” as these were “goads,” correcting the errors of previous thought and urging men on to new pastures of truth and godliness.

Sometimes, as I have said, the progressive Sage and the conservative Master would be united in the same person; for there are teachers who can “stand on the old ways” and yet “look for the new.” But often, no doubt, the two would be divided and opposed then as now. For in thought, as in politics, there are always two great parties; the one looking back with affectionate regret on the past and set to “keep invention in a *noted* weed,” the other looking forward with eager hope and desire to the future, attached to “new-found methods and to compounds strange;” the one bent on conserving as much as possible of the large heritage which our fathers have bequeathed us, the other bent on leaving a new and fairer inheritance to those that shall be after them. Each of these classes has its special danger, and is sorely tempted to undervalue the other. The danger of the conservative thinker is that he may hold *the debts* which our fathers have bequeathed us with the estate as part of the estate, that he may set himself against all liquidations, all better methods of management, against improvement in every form. The danger of the progressive thinker is that, in his ambition to enlarge and improve the estate, he may break violently from the

past and cast away many heirlooms and treasures that would add to our wealth. The one is too apt to pitch his tents in familiar fields long after they are barren ; the other is too apt to drive men on from old pastures to new before the old are exhausted or the new ripe. And surely there never was a larger or more tolerant heart than that of the Preacher who has taught us that both these classes of men and teachers, both the conservative thinker and the progressive thinker, are of God and have a useful function to discharge : that both the Shepherd who loves his tent and the Herdsman who loves his goad, both the Sage who urges us forward and the Sage who holds us back are servants of the one Great Pastor, and owe whether goad or tent-stake to Him. Simply to entertain the thought widens and raises our minds : to have conceived it and thrown it into that perfect form proves the Sacred Preacher to have been all he claims to be and more,—not only Sage, Teacher, Author, but also a true poet and a true man of God.

It is to be observed however that our accomplished Sage limits the province of mental activity on either hand (v. 12). His children, his disciples—"my son" was the rabbi's customary term for his pupil as "rabbi," my father, was the name by which the pupil addressed his master—are to beware both of the "many books" of the making of which there was then "no end," and of that over-addiction to study which was "a weariness to the flesh." The latter caution, the warning against "*much* study" was

simply a result of that sense of the sanitary value of physical labour by which, as we have seen, the Masters in Israel were profoundly impressed. They held physical toil and exercise to be good for the soul as well as for the body, a safeguard against the dreamy abstract moods and the vague fruitless reveries which rather relax than brace the intellectual fibre, and which tend to a moral languour all the more perilous because its approaches are masked under the semblance of mental occupation. They knew that those who attempt or affect to be "creatures too bright and good for human nature's daily food" are apt to sink below the common level rather than to rise above it. They did not want their disciples to resemble many of the young men who lounged through the philosophic schools of Greece, and who, though always ready to discuss the "first true, first perfect, first fair," did nothing to help forward the progress of man or to raise the tone of common life; young men, as Epictetus bitterly remarked of some of his disciples, whose philosophy lay in their cloaks and tongues rather than in any wise conduct of their daily lives or any endeavour to better the world. It was their aim to develop the whole man—body, soul, and spirit; to train up useful citizens as well as accomplished scholars, to spread the love of wisdom through the whole nation rather than to produce a separate learned class. And in the prosecution of this aim they enjoined neither the exercises of the ancient palæstra, nor athletic sports like those now in

vogue at our universities, which are often a mere waste of good muscle, but useful and productive toils. They believed, not in "the gospel of the cricket-bat," but in the gospel of the plough and the spade, the plane and the axe, the hammer and the trowel; and saved their disciples from the weariness of overtaxed brains by requiring them to become skilled artizans and to labour heartily in their callings.

Nor is the caution against "many books," at which learned Commentators have taken grave offence, the illiberal sentiment it has often been pronounced. For no doubt Coheleth, like other wise Hebrews, was fully prepared to study whatever science would throw light on the Divine Law or teach men how to live. Mathematics, astronomy, natural history, medicine, casuistry, the modern and religious systems of the East and the West,—some knowledge of all these various branches of learning was necessary, as I have shown, to those who had to interpret the minute and complex statutes of the Mosaic Code, and to supplement them with rules appropriate to the new conditions of the time. In these and kindred studies the rabbis were "masters;" and what they knew they taught. That which distinguished them from other men equally learned was that they did not "love knowledge simply for its own sake," but for an end higher than itself—the moral good of their race. Like Socrates, they were not content with a purely intellectual culture, but sought a wisdom

that would mingle with the blood of men and mend their ways, a wisdom that would hold their baser passions in check, energize the higher moods and aptitudes of the soul, and make duty their supreme aim and delight. To secure this great end they knew no method so likely to prove effectual as an earnest, and even an exclusive, study of the Sacred Scriptures in which they thought they had "eternal life," *i.e.* the life which is unaffected by the shocks and vicissitudes of time. Whatever studies would illuminate and illustrate these Scriptures they pursued and encouraged; whatever might divert attention from these they discouraged and condemned. Many of them, as we learn from the Talmud, refused to write down their own discourses in the Schools and Synagogues lest, by making books of their own, they should withdraw attention from the Sacred Books inspired of Heaven. It was better, they thought, to read the Scriptures than any commentary on the Scriptures; and therefore they confined themselves to oral instruction: even their profoundest and most characteristic sayings would have perished had not "fond tradition babbled" of them for many an age to come. ✓

If the sentiment which dictated this course were in part a mistaken sentiment, it surely sprung from a noble motive. For no ordinance could be more self-denying to a learned class than that which forbade them to put on record the results of their researches, the conclusions of their wisdom, and thus to win name and fame and use in after genera-



tions. But was their course, after all, one which calls for censure? Has the world ever produced a literature of so lofty a tone, so pure and heroic in its animating spirit, as that of the Hebrew Prophets and Psalmists? Would not the world be infinitely sweeter and better than it is had these ancient Scriptures been studied before all and above all uninspired writings, if they had been brooded over and wrought into the minds of men till "the life" in them had been assimilated and reproduced? The man who has had a classical or scientific education, and profited by it, must be an ingrate indeed, unless he be the slave of some dominant crotchet, if he do not hold in grateful reverence the great masters at whose feet he has sat: but the man who has really found "life" in the Scriptures must be more and worse than an ingrate if he does not feel that mental culture is a small good when compared with the treasures of an eternal life, if he does not admit that the main object of all education should be to conduct men through a course of intellectual training which shall culminate in a moral and spiritual discipline. To be wise is much; but how much more is it to be good! Better be a child in the kingdom of heaven than a philosopher or a prophet hanging vaguely about its outskirts.

If any of us still suspect the Preacher's words of illiberality, and say: "There was no need to oppose the one Book to the many, and to depreciate these in order to magnify that," we have only to consider the historical



circumstances in which he wrote in order to acquit him of the charge. For a long series of years the Holy Scriptures had been neglected by the Jews; copies had grown scarce and were hidden away in obscure nooks in which they were hard to find: some of the inspired books had been lost and have not been recovered to this day.\* The people were ignorant of their own history, and law, and hope. Suddenly they were awaked from the slumber of indifference to find themselves in a night of ignorance. During the miseries of the Captivity a longing for the Divine Word was quickened within them. They were eager to acquaint themselves with the Revelation which they had neglected and forgotten. And their teachers, the few men who knew and loved the Word, set themselves to deepen and satisfy the craving. They multiplied copies of the Scriptures, circulated them, explained them in the Schools, exhorted from them in the Synagogue. And till the people were familiar with the Scriptures, the wiser rabbis would not write books of their own, nor encourage the reading of the many books bred by the

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\* Among the "lost books" of the Old Testament are "the Book of Jasher" cited in Joshua x. 12, 13, and 2 Sam. i. 18; Nathan's and Gad's Biographies of David mentioned in 1 Chron. xxix. 29, as "the Book of Nathan the Prophet" and "the Book of Gad the Seer;" and three works connected with the life of Solomon—his "Acts," as narrated in "the Book of Nathan, in the Prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the Visions of Iddo the Seer," 2 Chron. ix. 29.

revived literary activity of the time. It was the very feeling which preceded and accompanied our English Reformation. Then the newly-discovered Bible threw all other books into the shade. The people thirsted for the pure Word of God; and the leaders of the Reformation were well content that they should read nothing else till they had read *that*: that they should leave all other fountains to drink of "the river of life." The translation and circulation of the Scriptures was the one work, almost the exclusive work, to which they bent their energies. Like the Jewish rabbis, Tyndall and his fellow-labourers did not care to write books themselves, nor wish the people to read the books they were compelled to write in self-defence. There is a remarkable passage in Fryth's "Scripture Doctrine of the Sacrament" in which, replying to Sir Thomas More who led the opposition to the new movement, the Reformer says: "This hath been offered you, is offered, and shall be offered. Grant that the Word of God, I mean the text of Scripture, may go abroad in our English tongue . . . and my brother Tyndall and I have done and will promise you to write no more. If you will not grant this condition, then will we be doing while we have breath, and show in few words that the Scripture doth in many, and so at the least save some." The Hebrew Reformers of the time of Coheleth were animated by precisely the same lofty and generous motive. They were content to be nothing that the Word

of God might be all for all. "The Bible, and the Bible only," they conceived to be the want of their age and race ; and therefore they were content to forego the honours of authorship and the study of many branches of learning which otherwise they would have been glad to pursue, and besought their disciples to concentrate all their thoughts on the one Book which was able to make them wise unto salvation. Learned themselves, and often profoundly learned, it was no contempt for learning which actuated them, but a devout godliness and the fervours of a most self-denying piety.

"Does not the Preacher break his own rule ? He at all events adds one to the 'many books' which already existed, a book the true meaning of which cannot be apprehended without 'much study' and such study as is at times wearisome to the flesh." No, he does not break his rule. For, first of all, his book *is* a Scripture ; it is inspired by one and the selfsame Spirit with those elder Scriptures to which he would have his disciples devote their energies. And, then, besides being a Scripture, it served to explain other Scriptures ; to teach men how their lives might be ordered by the law of God. In this Book there are both the words of a conservative Master and the words of a progressive Sage ; both words which applied the Divine Law to the details of human life and words which opened up new and broader views of human life ; words which threw new light both upon the past and the future. It was

only against "what was more than these," only against words and books which neither explained the bearing of the Divine Law on human action nor extended the boundaries of human thought until they embraced the whole counsel of God, that the Preacher raised his protest. For the present need he thought it well that his disciples should restrict their studies to the Inspired Word; but within the limits of that Word they were to seek things both new and old. A rabbi conscious of no special inspiration from heaven might well scruple to add even one to the many books which were already abroad; but a rabbi who felt that the Divine Spirit had taught him so to marshal the facts of human life as to help his brethren out of their perplexities and guide them in their Quest of the Chief Good was surely bound to give them the wisdom God had given to him.

So far the Epilogue seems a mere digression, not without interest and value indeed, but having no vital connection with the main theme of the Poem. It tells us that the Preacher was a Sage, a recognized official Teacher, the Master of an Assembly, a Doctor of laws, an Author who had expended much labour on the composition of many parables, a conservative "Shepherd" pitching his tent on familiar fields of thought, a progressive "Herdsman" goading men on to new pastures.\* If we are glad to know

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\* The reader will not fail to note that the titles here assumed by Cobeleth

so much of him, we cannot but ask, What has all this to do with the Quest of the Chief Good? It has this to do with it. Coheleth has achieved that quest: he has solved his problem and given us his solution of it. He is about to repeat that solution. To give emphasis and force to the repetition, that he may carry his readers more fully with him, he dwells on his claims to their respect, their confidence, their affection. He is all that they most admire; he has the very authority to which they most willingly defer. If they know this—and, scattered as the Jews were through many cities and provinces, most of them could not know it unless he told them—they cannot refuse him a hearing; they will be pre-disposed to accept his conclusion; they will be sure not to reject it without grave consideration and regret. It is not out of any personal conceit therefore, nor any pride of learning, that he recites his titles of honour. He is simply gathering force from the willing respect and deference of his readers in order that he may plant his final conclusion more strongly and more deeply in their hearts.

And what is the conclusion which he is at such pains to enforce? "The conclusion of the whole matter is this: that God taketh cognizance of all things: Fear God,

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are inconsistent with the Solomon's authorship of the Book, as is indeed the whole tone and spirit of the Epilogue; while, on the other hand, tone, spirit, titles, all agree with and confirm the theory of a later and Rabbinical authorship.

therefore, and keep His commandments, for this it behoveth all men to ; since God will bring every deed to the judgment appointed for every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be bad " (vv. 13, 14).

Now that this "conclusion" is simply a repetition, in part expanded and in part condensed, of that with which the Preacher closes the previous Section is sufficiently obvious. *There* he incites men to a life of virtue with two leading motives : first, by the fact of the present constant judgment of God ; and, secondly, by the prospect of a future, a more searching and decisive, judgment. *Here* he appeals to precisely the same motives, though now, instead of implying the present judgment of God under the injunction "Remember thy Creator," he broadly affirms "that God taketh cognizance of all things;" and, instead of simply reminding the young that God will bring "the ways of their heart" into judgment, he defines that future judgment at once more largely and more exactly as "appointed for every secret thing" and extending to "every deed," whether these be good or bad. In dealing with the motives of a virtuous life, therefore, he a little goes beyond his former lines of thought, gives them a wider scope, makes them more sharp and definite. On the other hand, in speaking of the forms which a virtuous life should assume, he is very curt and brief. All he has to say on that point now is, "Fear God and keep His commandments:" whereas in his previous treatment of it he had had much to



say,—bidding us, for instance, “cast our bread upon the waters,” and “give a portion thereof to seven, and even to eight:” bidding us “sow our seed morning and evening” though “the clouds” should “be full of rain” and whatever “the course of the wind;” bidding us “rejoice” in all our labours, and carry to all our self-denials a merry medicinal heart. As we studied the meaning of the many beautiful figures of the Eleventh Chapter, as we sought to gather up their several meanings into an orderly connection and to express them in a more literal logical form—to translate them, in short, from the Eastern to the Western mode,—we found that the main virtues enjoined by the Preacher were charity, industry, cheerfulness: the charity which does good hoping for nothing again, the industry which bends itself to the present duty in scorn of omen or consequence, and the cheerfulness which springs from a consciousness of the Divine presence, from the conviction that, however men may misjudge us, God knows us altogether and will one day reveal the secrets of all hearts. This was our summary of the Preacher’s argument, of his solution of the supreme moral problem of life. Here, in the Epilogue, he gives us his own summary in the words: “Fear God, and keep His commandments.”

If we compare these two summaries, there seems at first rather difference than resemblance between them: the one appears, if more indefinite, much more comprehensive than the other. Yet there is one point of resemblance which



soon strikes us. For we know very well that on the Preacher's lips "Fear God" does not mean "Be afraid of God;" that it indicates and demands just that reverent sense of the Divine Presence, that strong inward conviction of the constant judgment God passes on all our ways and motives and thoughts, which Coheleth has already affirmed to be a prime safeguard of virtue. It is the phrase "keep His commandments" which sounds so much larger than anything we have heard from him before, so much more comprehensive. For the commandments of God are many and very broad. He reveals His will in the natural laws which govern the universe, and which, inasmuch as we are part of the universe, we need to know and to obey. He reveals His will in the social and political forces which govern the history and development of the various races of mankind, which therefore meet and affect us at every turn. He reveals His will in the moral codes which govern the formation of inward character, which enter into and give shape to all in us that is most spiritual, profound, enduring. To keep all the commandments revealed in these immense provinces of Divine action with an intelligent and an invariable obedience is simply impossible to us: it is the perfection which flows round our imperfection, and towards which it is our one great task to reach forth and will always be our task. Is it as inciting us to this impossible perfection that the Preacher bids us "Fear God and keep His commandments"?

Yes and No. It is not as having this large perfect ideal distinctly before his mind that he utters his injunction, nor even as having so much of it in his mind as is expressed in the complex law that came by Moses—in which, as you will remember, there are precepts for the physical and political as well as for the moral and religious life. What he meant by bidding us “keep the commandments” was, I apprehend, that we should take the counsels he has already given us, and follow after charity, industry, cheerfulness. Every other phrase in this final “conclusion of the whole matter” is, as we have seen, a repetition of the truths announced at the close of the previous Section, and therefore we may fairly assume this phrase to contain a truth—the truth of duty—which he there illustrates. Throughout the whole Book there is not a single technical allusion, no allusion to the temple, to the feasts, to the sacrifices, rites, ceremonies of the Law: and therefore we can hardly take this reference to God’s “commandments” as an allusion to the Mosaic code. By the rules of fair interpretation we are compelled to take these commandments as previously defined by the Preacher himself, to understand him as once more enforcing the virtues which he has already suggested as comprising the whole duty of man.

Do we thus limit and degrade the moral ideal, or represent him as degrading and limiting it? By no means. For to love our neighbour, to discharge the present duty

whatever rain may fall and whatever storm may blow, to carry a bright cheerful spirit to all our toils and acts of goodwill ; to do this in the fear of God, as in His presence, because He is judging us and will judge us, involves all that is, included in the loftiest ideal of moral duty and perfection. For how are we to be cheerful and dutiful and kind except as we obey the commandments of God whether these commandments be revealed in the physical universe, or in the history of man, or in his spiritual culture and progress ? The diseases which result from a violation of sanitary laws, as also the ignorance or the wilfulness or the impotence which lead us to violate social or moral laws, of necessity and by natural consequence impair our cheerfulness, our strength for laborious duties, our neighbourly charity and goodwill. To live the life which the Preacher recommends on the inspiration of the motives which he supplies is therefore, in the largest and broadest sense, to keep all the commandments of God.

What advantage is there then in saying, "Be kind, be dutiful, be cheerful," over saying, "Obey all the laws of God, sanitary, social, moral" ? There is this great practical advantage : that, while in the last resort the one rule of life is just as comprehensive as the other and just as difficult, it is more definite, more portable : it does not daunt us at the very outset with an unnerving sense of our own ignorance and weakness. It is the very advantage which our Lord's memorable summary, "Thou shalt love

the Lord thy God with all thy heart and thy neighbour as thyself," has over the Law and the Prophets. Bid a man keep the whole Mosaic code as interpreted by the prophets through a thousand years, and you set him a task so heavy, so hopeless, that he may well decline it: only to understand the bearing and harmony of the Mosaic statutes and to gather the sense in which the several prophets interpreted them is the labour of a lifetime, a labour for which even the whole life of a trained scholar is insufficient. But bid him "Love God and man," and you give him a rule which his own conscience at once accepts and interprets, a rule which, if he be of a good heart and a willing mind, he will be able to apply to the details and problems of life as they arise. In like manner, if you say: "The true ideal of life is to be reached only by the man who comprehends and obeys all the laws of God as revealed in the physical universe, in the history of humanity, in the moral instincts and intuitions and discoveries of the race," you set him a task so stupendous that not only has no man ever been able to accomplish it, but to this day it remains unaccomplished by the united wisdom and virtue of mankind. Say, on the other hand, "Do the duty of every hour as it passes, without fretting about future issues; help your neighbour to do his duty or to bear his burden, even though he may never have helped you; be blithe and cheerful when your work is hard and your neighbour is ungrateful or unkind," and you speak to his heart, to his sense of what is just and

right and good. He can begin to practise your rule of life without preliminary and exhausting study of its meaning: and if he finds it *work*, as he assuredly will, he will be encouraged to make it his rule. He will soon discover indeed that it means more than he thought, that it includes much more than he saw in it at first, that it is very much harder to keep than he supposed; but its depths and difficulties will open on him gradually, as he is able to bear them. If his heart now and then faint, if hand and foot falter, still God is with him, with him to help and reward as well as to judge; and *that* conviction once in his mind is there for ever, a constant stimulus to thought, to obedience, to patience.

In nothing indeed does the wisdom of the inspired Hebrew sages show its superiority over that of the other sages of antiquity more decisively than in its adaptation to the practical needs of men busied in the affairs of life, and with no learning and no leisure for the study of large intricate problems. If you read Confucius, for instance, or Plato, you cannot fail to be struck with their immense grasp of thought, or their profound learning, or even their moral enthusiasm: as you read, you will often meet with wise rules of life expressed in beautiful forms. And yet your main feeling will be that they give you and men like you little help, that unless you had their rare endowments or could give yourself wholly to the study of their works, you could hardly hope to learn what they have to

teach or to order your life by their rules. And that this feeling is just and accurate is proved by the histories of China and Greece. In China only students, only literati are so much as supposed to understand the moral system of Confucius; the great bulk of the people have to be content with a few rules and forms and rites which his disciples have dictated to them and of the moral bases of which they are utterly ignorant. In ancient Greece, as we all know, the wisdom to which the great masters of antiquity attained was only taught in the Schools to men who had addicted themselves to a philosophic life: even the natural and moral truths on which the popular mythology was founded were hidden in "mysteries" open only to the initiated few: while the great mass of the people were amused with fables which they misinterpreted and with rites which they soon degraded into licentious orgies. No man cared for *their* souls: their mistakes were not corrected, their license met no rebuke. Their wise men made no endeavour to lift them to a height from which they might see that the whole of morality lay in the love of God and man—in charity, duty, cheerfulness. But it was far otherwise with the Hebrews and their sages. The holy men who were taught by the Holy Ghost, men such as the Preacher, confined themselves to no school or class, but carried their wisdom to the synagogue, to the market-place, to the popular assemblies and academies. They invented no "mysteries," but brought down the mysteries



of heaven to the understanding of the simple. Instead of engaging in lofty abstract speculations in which only the learned could follow them, they compressed the loftiest wisdom into plain moral rules which the unlettered could comprehend, and urged them to obedience by motives and promises which inflamed the popular heart. And they had their reward. The truths of God became familiar to all sorts and conditions of Hebrew men; they became a factor, and the most influential factor, in the national life. Fishermen, carpenters, tent-makers, sandal-makers, publicans grew studious of the Divine Will and learned the secrets of peace. During the wonderful revival of literary and religious activity which followed the Exile in Babylon, every Hebrew child was compelled to attend a common school in which the Sacred Scriptures—almost their sole literature then—were taught by the ablest and most learned rabbis: in which, as we learn from the Talmud, the duty of leading a religious life in all outward conditions even to the poorest was impressed upon them, and the very virtues of the Preacher—the virtues of charity, industry, cheerfulness—were enforced as the very soul of religion. Here, for example, is a legend from the Talmud, and it is only one of many like unto it, which illustrates and confirms all that I have said.—“A sage, while walking in a crowded market-place, suddenly encountered the prophet Elijah, and asked him who, out of that vast multitude, would be saved. Whereupon the



Prophet first pointed out a weird-looking creature, a turn-key, 'because he was merciful to his prisoners,' and next two common-looking tradesmen who were walking through the crowd, pleasantly chatting together. The Sage instantly rushed after them, and asked them what were their saving works. But they, much puzzled, replied: 'We are but poor workmen who live by our trade. All that can be said for us is that we are always of a cheerful spirit, and are good-natured. When we meet anybody who seems sad we join him, and we talk to him and cheer him so long that he must forget his grief. And if we know of two people who have quarreled, we talk to them, and persuade them, until we have made them friends again. This is our whole life.'" It is simply impossible that such a legend should have sprung up in any ancient literature save that of the Jews. Had Confucius been asked to point out the man whom Heaven most approved, he would probably have replied, "The superior man is catholic, not sectarian; he does not do to others what he would not have done to himself;" \* "he is observant of the rules of Propriety;" and

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\* This partial anticipation of the Golden Rule will be found in the Confucian Analects, Book xv. chap. xxiii. "Tsze-kung asked, saying, 'Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?' The Master said, 'Is not *reciprocity* such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.'" The same rule is given in another form in Book v. Chap. xi. of the Analects. The other phrases I have put into the sage's mouth are quoted from the same work.

he would certainly have looked for him in a State official distinguished by his wise administration. Had any of the Greek sages been asked the same question, they would have found their perfect man in the philosopher who, raised above the common passions and aims of men, gave himself to the pursuit of an abstract and speculative wisdom. Only a Hebrew would have looked for him in that low estate in which, by the wisdom of God and in His great humility, the one truly Perfect Man dwelt among us. And yet how that Hebrew legend charms us and commends itself to us! What a hope for humanity there is in the thought, that the poor weird-looking jailer who was merciful to his prisoners, and the kindly, industrious, cheerful working men, living by their craft, and incapable of regarding their diligence and good-nature as saving works, stood higher than priest or rabbi, philosopher or ruler! How welcome and ennobling is the conviction that there are last who yet are first—last with men, first with God; that turnkeys and artizans, even publicans and harlots may draw nearer to Heaven than sophist or flamen, sage or prince! Who so poor but that he has a little “bread” to cast on the thankless unreturning waters? who so faint of heart but that he may sow a little “seed” even when the winds rave and the sky is full of clouds? who so solitary and forlorn but that he may say a word of comfort to a weeping neighbour or seek to make “two people who have quarreled friends again?” And this is all that

the Preacher, all that God through the Preacher, asks of us.

*All*—yet even this is much ; even for this we shall need the help of constant and weighty motives : for it is not only occasional acts which are required of us, but settled tempers and habits of goodwill, diligence, cheerfulness ; and to love all men, to rejoice always, to do our duty in all weathers and all moods is very hard to our weak, selfish, and easily-dejected natures. Does the Preacher supply us with such motives as we need ? He offers us two motives ; one in the present judgment, another in the future judgment of God. “God is with you,” he says, “taking cognizance of all you do ; and you will soon be with God, to give Him an account of every secret and every deed.” But *that* is an appeal to fear—is it not ? It is rather an appeal to love and hope. He has no thought of frightening us into obedience—for the obedience of fear is not worth having, is *not* obedience in the true sense ; but he is trying to win and allure us to obedience. For whatever terrors God’s judgment or the future world may have for us, it is very certain that these terrors were in large measure unknown to the Jews. The Talmud knows nothing of “hell,” nothing of an everlasting torture. Even the “Sheol” of the Old Testament Scriptures is simply the “under-world” in which the Jews thought the spirits of good men and bad were gathered after death. And to the Jews for whom Coheleth wrote the judgment of God, whether here

or hereafter, would have singular and powerful attractions. They were in captivity to merciless and capricious despots who took no pains to understand their character, their habits, their modes of thought and worship—despots who had no sense of justice, no kindness, no ruth for slaves. For men thus oppressed and hopeless there would be an infinite comfort in the thought that God, the Great Ruler and Disposer, knew them altogether, saw all their struggles to maintain His worship and to do His will, took note of every wrong they suffered, “was afflicted in all their afflictions;” and would one day call both them and their oppressors to the bar at which all wrongs are righted, all services recompensed, all cruelty and unmercifulness avenged. Would it affright *them*, think you, to hear “that God taketh cognizance of all things,” and has “appointed a judgment for every secret and every deed”? Rather would not this be their strongest consolation, their brightest hope? Would they not do their duty with a better heart, if they knew that God saw how hard it was? Would they not show a more constant kindness to their neighbour, if they knew that God would openly reward every alms done in secret? Would they not carry a blither and more patient spirit to all their labours and sufferings, if they knew that a day of recompenses was at hand? The Preacher thought they would: and hence he bids them “rejoice,” bids them “banish care and sadness,” *because* God will bring them into judgment, and incites them to

“keep the commandments” because God’s eye is on them, and because, in the judgment, He will not forget the work of their obedience, the labour of their love.

This to some of us may be a novel view whether of the present or of the future judgment of God. For the most part, I fear, we speak of the Divine judgments as terrible and well-nigh unendurable. We would escape them even here, if we could ; but, above all, we dread them when we shall stand before the bar at which the secrets of all hearts will be disclosed. Now we need not, and we must not, lose aught of that awe and reverence for Him who is our God and Father which, so far from impairing, deepens our love. But we need to remember that fear is base, that it is the enemy of love ; that so long as we anticipate the Divine judgments only or mainly with dread, we are far from the love which alone gives value to obedience ; and that, if we are to be good and happy, we must “shut out fear with all the strength of hope.” What is it that we fear ? Suffering ! But why should we fear that if we shall be the better and happier for it ? Death ! But why should we fear that if it will take us home to our Father ? God’s anger ! But God is not angry with us if we love Him and try to do His will ; He loves us even when we sin against Him, and shows His love in making our sin so hard and painful to us that we can know no peace till we have cast it away. We are to guard against sin lest we should be judged here and now ; but, says St. Paul, “when we are

judged, we are chastened that we should not be condemned." Is it not better to be chastened than condemned? Shall we dread, shall we not rather desire, the judgment by which we are purified and saved?

"But the future judgment—that is so dreadful!" Is it? God knows us as we are already: is it so very much worse that we should know ourselves and that our neighbours should know us? If among our "secrets" there be many things evil—are there not some good? Do we not find ourselves perpetually thwarted or hindered in our endeavours to give form and scope to our best feelings, to our kindest tenderest sympathies, to our loftiest resolves? Do we not perpetually complain that when we would do good, even if evil is not present to overcome the good, it is present to mar it, to make our goodness poor, scanty, ungraceful? Well, these obstructed purposes and intentions and resolves, all the good in us that has been frustrated or deformed by our social conditions, by our lack of power, culture, expression, by the clogging flesh or by the flagging brain,—all these are among "the secret things" which God will bring to light; and we may be very sure that He will not think less of these, His own work in us, than of the manifold sins by which we have marred His work. We are in some danger of regarding "the judgment" as a revelation of our trespasses only, instead of a revelation of the whole man, the "good" in him as well as the "bad." Once conceive of it aright, as the disclosure



of all that is in us, and mere honesty might well lead us to desire rather than to dread it. One of the finest and most devout spirits\* of modern France has said: "It seems to me intolerable to appear to men other than we appear to God. My worst torture at this moment is the overestimate which generous friends form of me. We are told that at the last judgment the secret of all consciences will be laid bare to the universe; *would that mine were so this day, and that every passer-by could read me as I am!*" To seem what we are, to be known for what we are, to be treated as what we are, this is the judgment of God. And, though this judgment must bring even the best of us much shame and much sorrow, who that sincerely loves God and truth will not rejoice to have done at last with all subterfuge, all hypocrisy, all smooth insincerities, to wear his natural colours, and to take his true place, even though it be the lowest?

In the corrupted currents of this world  
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,  
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself  
Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;  
There is no shuffling, there the action lies  
In its true nature, and we ourselves compell'd  
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults  
To give in evidence.†

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\* Maurice de Guérin, in his celebrated "Journal."

† Hamlet. Act III., Scene iii.



To have got out of "the corrupted currents" of which audacious and strong injustice so often avails itself to our hurt; to be quit of all the shuffling equivocations by which we so often pervert the true character of our actions and persuade ourselves that we are other and better than we are; to be compelled to look our faults straight and fairly in the face; to have all the latent goodness of our natures developed, and their fettered and obstructed virtue liberated from every hindering bond; to see our "every deed" good as well as bad, and our "every secret" good as well as bad, brought to light: is there no hope, no comfort for us in such a prospect as this? It is a prospect full of comfort, full of hope, if at least we have any real trust in the grace and kindness of God; and if, through His grace, we have set ourselves to do our duty, to love our neighbour, to bear all the changes and sorrows of life with a patient cheerful heart.

Now that we have once more heard the Preacher's final conclusion, we shall have no difficulty in fitting into its place, or valuing at its worth, the partial and provisional conclusion to which he rises at the close of the previous Sections of the Book. In the First Section he describes his Quest of the Chief Good in Wisdom and in Mirth; he declares that though both wisdom and mirth are good, neither of them is the supreme good of life; and, in despair of reaching any higher mark, he closes with the admission

(Chap. ii. vv. 24—26), that even for the wise good man “there is nothing better than to eat and to drink, and to let his soul take pleasure in his labour.” In the Second Section he urges his Quest in Devotion to Business and Public Affairs, only to find his former conclusion confirmed (Chap. v. vv. 18—20); “Behold, that which I have said holds good; it is well for a man to eat and to drink, and to enjoy all the good of his labour through the brief day of his life: this is his portion; he should take his portion and rejoice in his labour, remembering that the days of his life are not many and that God meant him to work for the enjoyment of his heart.” In the Third Section, his Quest in Wealth and in the Golden Mean conducts him by another road to the same bright resting-place, which however, for all so bright as it looks, he seems to enter every time with a sadder and more dejected spirit (Chap. viii. v. 15): more and more ruefully he “commends mirth, because there is nothing better for man than to eat and to drink and to rejoice, and because *this* will go with him to his work through the days of his life which God giveth him under the sun.” To my mind there is a strange pathos in the mournful tones in which the Preacher commends mirth, in the plaintive minors of a voice from which we should naturally expect the clear ringing majors of joy. As we listen to these recurring notes, we feel that he has been baffled in his Quest; that, starting every day in a fresh direction and travelling till he is weary and overspent, he

finds himself night after night at the very spot he had left in the morning, and can only alleviate the unwelcome surprise by muttering, "As well here perhaps as elsewhere!" No votary of mirth and jollity surely ever wore so rueful a face, or sang their praises with more trembling and reluctant lips. What can be more hopeless than his "*there is nothing better*, so you must even be content with this," or than his constant reference to the brevity of life! You feel that the man has been passionately seeking for something better, for a good which would be a good not only through the brief days of this life, but through all time; that it is with a heart broken by the sense of wasted endeavour and keen unsatisfied cravings that he falls back on pleasures as brief as his day, as wearisome as his toils. Yet all the while he feels, and makes you feel, that there is a truth in his conclusion; that mirth is a great good, though not the greatest; that if he could but find that "something better" of which he is in quest, he would learn the secret of a deeper mirth than that which springs from eating and drinking and sensuous delights, a mirth which would not set with the setting sun of his brief day.

This feeling is justified by the issue. Now that the Preacher has completed his circle of thought, we can see that it *is* well for a man to rejoice and take pleasure in his labours, that God did mean him to work for the enjoyment of his heart, that there is a mirth purer and more enduring

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than that which springs from knowledge or from the gratification of the senses, or from success in the affairs of business, or from the possession of wealth,—a mirth for this life which widens and deepens into an everlasting joy. Throughout his Quest Coheleth held fast to the conviction that “it is a comely fashion to be glad,” though he could give no better reasons for his conviction than the transitoriness of life and the impossibility of reaching any higher good. Before he could justify this conviction, before he could really satisfy us that “creatures such as we are in such a world as this” should be blithe, cheerful, glad, he must achieve his Quest. It is only when he has learned to regard our life

as a harp,

A gracious instrument on whose fair strings

We learn those airs we shall be set to play

When mortal hours are ended,

that his plaintive minors pass into the light jocund tones appropriate to a sincere and well-grounded mirth. *Now* he can cease to “trouble deaf heaven with his bootless cries” about the indiscrimination of death and the vanity of all things under the sun. He can now say to his soul,

What hast thou to do with sorrow

Or the injuries of to-morrow?

for he has discovered that no morrow can any more injure him, that no sorrow can rob him of his Chief Good. God

is with him now and here, observing all the postures and moods of his soul, and adapting all his circumstances to the correction of what is evil in him or the culture of what is good. There is no dark impassable gulf between this world and the heavenly world in which God dwells: life does not cease at death, but grows more intense, more full; death is but a second birth into a second and better life, a life of happier and more favourable conditions, yet a life which is the continuation and consummation of that which we now live in the flesh. All that he has to do, therefore, is to "fear God and keep His commandments," leaving the issues of his labour in the wise gentle Hands which bend all things to a final goal of good. What though the clouds drop rain, or the winds blow bitterly, what though his life be overshadowed or his diligence and charity meet no present recognition or reward? All that is no business of his. He has only to do the duty of the passing day and to help his neighbours to do their duty. So long as he can do this, why should he not be bright and gay? In this lies his Chief Good: why should he not enjoy that, even though other and lesser goods be taken from him for a time—be lent to the Lord that they may hereafter be repaid with usury? He is no longer

a pipe for fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please;

he has a tune of his own, "a cheerful tune," to play, and

*will* play it let fortune be in what mood she please. He is not "passion's slave," but the servant and the friend of God; and because God is with him and for him, because he will soon be with God, he is

As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,

and can take "fortune's buffets and rewards with equal thanks." His cheerful content does not lie at the mercy of accident; the winds and waves of vicissitude cannot prevail against it: for it has two broad solid foundations, one on earth, the other in heaven. On the one hand, it springs from a faithful discharge of personal duty and a neighbourly charity which hopeth all things and endureth all things: on the other hand, it springs from the conviction that God taketh cognizance of all things, and will bring every secret and every deed into judgment. The fair structure which rises on these sure foundations is not to be shaken by aught that does not sap the foundations on which it rests. Convince him that God is not with him, or that God does not so care for him as to judge and reward him according to his deeds; convict him of gross and constant failures in duty or in charity: and then indeed you touch, you endanger, his peace. But no external loss, no breath of change, no cloud in the sky of his fortunes, no loss, no infirmity that does not impede him in the doing of his duty, can do more than cast a passing shadow on his heart. Whatever happens, into



whatever new conditions or new worlds he may pass, his chief good and therefore his supreme joy is with him.

This man is freed from servile bands  
Of hope to rise or fear to fall :  
Lord of himself, though not of lands,  
And, having nothing, yet hath all.

Now too, without fear or favour, without any prejudice for or against his conclusion because we find it in Holy Writ, we may ask ourselves : Has the Preacher satisfactorily solved the problem with which he started ? has he really achieved his Quest and attained the Chief Good ? One thing is quite clear ; he has not lost himself in speculations foreign to our experience and remote from it ; he has dealt with the common facts of life such as they were in his time, such as they remain in our time : for now as then men are restless and craving, and seek the satisfactions of rest in science or in pleasure, in successful public careers or in the fortunate conduct of affairs, by securing wealth or by laying up a modest provision for present and future wants. Now as then •

The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,  
Is not to fancy what were fair in life  
Providing it could be,—but, finding first  
What may be, then find how to make it fair  
Up to our means—a very different thing.\*

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\* "Bishop Blougram's Apology : " Browning.



That the Preacher should have attacked this common problem, and should have handled it with the practical good sense which characterizes his Poem, is a point, and a large point, in his favour.

Nor is the conclusion at which he arrives, in its substance, peculiar to him or even to the Sacred Scriptures. He says: The perfect man, the ideal man, is he who addresses himself to present duty untroubled by adverse clouds and currents, who so loves his neighbour that he can do good even to the evil and the unthankful, and who carries a brave cheerful temper to the unrewarded toils and unrecognized sacrifices of his life, because God is with him, taking note of all he does, and because there is a future life, for which this course of duty, charity, and magnanimity will be the best preparation. He affirms that the man who has risen to the discovery and practice of this ideal has attained the Chief Good, that he has found a duty from which no accident can divert him, a pure tranquil joy which will go with him through all vicissitude and loss and grief. And, on his behalf, I am bold to assert that, allowing for inevitable differences of conception and utterance, his conclusion is the conclusion of all the great teachers of morality whether of ancient or modern times, whether blessed or not blessed with the immediate inspiration of the Almighty. Take any of the ancient systems of morality and religion, Hindu, Egyptian, Persian, Chinese, Greek or Latin; select those elements of it in virtue of

which it has lived for centuries and commanded the allegiance of myriads of men ; reduce these elements to their simplest forms, express them in the plainest words : and, unless I am much mistaken, you will find that in every case they are only different versions of the final conclusion of the Preacher. “ Do your duty patiently ; Be kind and helpful one to another ; Show a cheerful content with your lot ; Heaven is with you and will judge you : ”—these brief maxims seem to be the moral epitome of all the creeds and systems that have had their day as also of those which even yet have not ceased to be. It is very true that the motive to obedience which Coheleth draws from the future life has been of a varying force and influence, rising perhaps to its greatest clearness among the Egyptians and the Persians, sinking to its dimmest among the Greeks and Romans, although we cannot say it did not shine even on these ; for though the secret of their “ mysteries ” has been kept with a rare fidelity, yet the general impression of antiquity concerning them was that, besides disclosing to the initiated the natural truths and moral relations which were the bases of the popular mythology, they “ opened to man a comforting prospect of a future state.” I am not careful to show how the Word of Inspiration surpasses all other “ scriptures ” in the precision with which it enunciates the elementary truths of all morality, in its freedom from admixture with baser matter, in its application of those truths to all sorts and conditions of men, and, above

all, in that it fuses them into a sacred constraining affection which dominates and gathers to itself

All thoughts, all passions, all delights  
Which stir within this mortal frame :

that is no part of my present duty. The one point on which I would ask you to reflect is this : With what an enormous weight of authority, drawn from all creeds and systems, from the whole moral experience of humanity, the conclusion of the Preacher comes to us ; how we stand rebuked by the wisdom of all past ages if, after duly testing it, we have not adopted his solution of the moral problem of life and are not working it out. Out of every land, in all the different languages of the divided earth, from the lips of all the antique sages whom we reverence for their excellence or their wisdom, no less than from the mouths of prophet and psalmist, preacher and apostle, there come to us voices which with one consent bid us "fear God and keep His commandments ;"—a sacred chorus which paces down the aisles of Time, chanting the praise of the man who does his duty even though he lose by it, who loves his neighbour even though he win no love in return, who breasts the blows of circumstance with a tranquil heart, who by a wise use and a wise enjoyment of the life that now is qualifies himself for the better life to be.

This, then, is the Hebrew solution of "the common problem." It is also the Christian solution. For when

“the Fellow of the Lord of Hosts,” instead of “clutching at His equality with God,” humbled Himself and took on Him the form of a servant, the very ideal of perfect manhood became incarnate in this “Man from heaven.” Does the Hebrew Preacher, backed by the consentient voices of all the great sages of Antiquity, demand that the ideal man, moved thereto by his sense of a constant Divine Presence and the hope of God’s future judgment, should cast the bread of his charity on the thankless waters of neighbourly ingratitude, give himself with all diligence to the discharge of duty whatever clouds may darken the heaven, whatever unkindly wind may nip his harvest, and maintain a calm, even a cheerful temper in all weathers and through all the changing seasons of life? His demand is met, and surpassed, by the Man Christ Jesus. *He* loved all men with a love which the many waters of their hostility and unthankfulness could not quench. Always about His Father’s business, when He laid aside the glory He had with the Father before the world was, He put off the robes of a king to don the weeds of the husbandman, and went forth to sow in all weathers beside all waters, undaunted by any wind of opposition, by any threatening cloud. In all the shocks of hostile circumstance, in the abiding agony and passion of a life short in years indeed but in sorrows above all measure long, He carried Himself with a cheerful patience which never wavered, knew a peace

which the world did not give and could not take away, for the joy set before Him despising even the bitter cross. In short, the very virtues inculcated by the Preacher were the very substance of "the highest holiest manhood" of Him who was both "human and divine." And if we ask, What were the motives which inspired this life of consummate and unparalleled excellence? we find among them the very motives suggested by Coheleth. The strong Son of Man was never alone because the Father was alway with Him, as truly with Him while He was on earth as when He was in heaven. He never bated heart nor hope because He knew that He would soon be with God, to be judged of Him, and to be recompensed according to the deeds done in the body of His humiliation. Men might misjudge Him; but the Judge of all the earth would do Him right. Men might award Him only a crown of thorns; but God would touch the thorns, and, at His quickening touch, they would flower into a garland of immortal beauty and honour.

Nor did the Lord Jesus help us in our Quest of the Chief Good only by becoming the Pattern of all virtue. The work of His redemption is even a more sovereign help. By the sacrifice of His death He took away the sins which had rendered the pursuit of excellence well-nigh a hopeless task. By the impartation of His Spirit no less than by the inspirations of His example, He seeks to win us to the love of our neighbour, to fidelity in the discharge of

daily duties, to that cheerful and constant trust in the providence of God by which we are redeemed from the shackles of care and fear. He, the Immanuel, by taking our flesh and dwelling among us, has proved that "God is with us," that He will in very deed dwell with men upon the earth. He, the Victor over Death, by His resurrection from the grave, has proved the truths of a future judgment and a future life with arguments of a force and quality unknown to our Hebrew fathers.

So that now as of old, now even more demonstrably than of old, "the conclusion of the whole matter" is to "fear God and keep His commandments." This is still the one solution of "the common problem" and "the whole duty of man." He who accepts this solution and discharges this duty—he has achieved the supreme Quest; to him it has been given to find the Chief Good.

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